

THE CHARIOT OF DESIRE

This is the story of two brothers who both want the same woman, one as wife, the other as mistress. Twenty-four hours before David went to Korea, Cathy married him, though she soon discovered that she was in love with his brother, Nick. When David returned from the war, after being reported missing, he found another fight on his hands—a fight to regain possession of his wife. The struggle involved him in Communist plans to sabotage the aircraft factory where Cathy worked. But David wanted his wife, even if it meant killing his test-pilot brother, even if it meant becoming a traitor to his country.

ALSO BY DERRICK NABARRO

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THE CHARIOT OF DESIRE

by
DERRICK NABARRO



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CHAPTER ONE

His eyes unshuttered on young daylight slanting through an unfamiliar window. His legs ached, pins and needles attacked his arm, and only his eyes moved, wide with incomprehension, first to the flower-decked latticework of the wallpaper, then to the small dark carpet with a purple rash, then to the girl at his side.

He heard the harsh, measured panting of a shunting locomotive followed by the bang-bang, bang-bang of iron buffers each jolting the next down the early morning line, then the scream, now far in the distance, of the unhalting express.

He blinked his eyes at the carpet and recognized the rash as confetti. He looked down at the sleeping Catherine and felt thankful that he had woken early and gained a few hours. He stared at the uniform over the chair-back and remembered a poem learnt at school. It described a girl waving good-bye to a warship leaving port, believing that love would turn the cannon-balls aside. His stubby unromantic fingers touched her forehead and wide temples and the line of her cheek and lips. He touched her throat and the curve of her breasts. He thought of war and bullets and shell-fire. No one had believed the poem.

As she awoke with a slight frown on her face his short-fingered hands pulled her head to his shoulder.

'Do you still love me?' he asked. He could feel her head nod.

'Let me hear you say it,' he said.

She kissed him gently. 'Of course I do,' she said.

'Say "I love you".'

'You know I love you,' she said.

'I love you, Cathy,' he said. Her breast filled with a compassion she accepted as the complete love of a woman for a man and closed her eyes as if to shut out any contradiction.

'If only you weren't going away,' she murmured.

'Why?' he asked.

'My mind and my soul are yours,' she said.

'But not your body?'

'Not yet.'

'"The winged horses . . . of the soul . . . and of the spirit are often dragged to earth by . . . the chariot of desire,"' said David hesitantly.

'If only time would stand still,' she said.

'Why did you marry me?' asked David.

'Because you're good and honest . . . and reliable.'

'But not romantic.'

'Holidays are romantic, but there's a warm feeling about arriving back home, and most of life centres round home.'

'Do we take our holidays together?' he asked and looked through the window at the sky daubed with mare's-tails to hide the ache in his heart.

'There are other kinds of love,' she said.

'But you don't feel this wonderment?' he asked.

'You knew before we married,' she said.

He nodded his head. 'I thought last night might have changed everything,' he said.

'Did it make you happy?' she asked.

'Yes,' he said.

'It's easier to give than to receive,' she said.

He tried to ignore the passing minutes but the quarter hours chimed on the town hall clock and the wind carried the strokes past the open window. Buses started and the clogs of the early mill-workers clattered on the pavement below.

He kissed her gently and brushed the hair away from

her high forehead. The black outcurling lashes of her eyes he touched with his lips and her eyelids blinked. A sad smile quivered at the edges of her full wide lips. He shook his head in disbelief that she could be his. Her eyes opened and he saw depths of a river pool where currents ran deep.

'Cathy,' he said, 'is something wrong?' She pulled his head down to her breast. She moved her lips and tried to make him forget his question.

'I wish you weren't going,' she whispered in his ear.

'Tell me not to worry,' he said.

At nine o'clock she sat upright.

'Breakfast in bed?' she asked.

'We can eat when we're apart,' he said.

'And smoke?' she asked.

'We don't want waiters,' he said, 'do we?'

'What'll I do while you're away?' she asked.

'Work hard and write letters,' he said.

'I must have a cigarette,' she said.

It hadn't been as hard as she had expected to be generous. She felt detached. She knew what had happened, what was going to happen, but it didn't register. It was like sitting perfectly warm and dry in a car driving through a thunderstorm knowing that sometime she would have to get out, but not yet.

'The train goes at ten,' said David.

'I'll wave good-bye from the platform.'

'Can you face it?' he asked.

'If it helps you,' she said.

'I'd like to take you with me,' he said.

'Why did you have to volunteer?' she asked. He dragged on his cigarette.

'A woman has to face childbirth,' he said.

'I don't see the connexion,' she said.

'If I ran away now, I'd be running away for the rest of my life,' he said.

'Would that be bad?' she asked.

'It is for a man,' he said.

'Can't you just be a man without having to prove it?' she asked. He shook his head.

'I want to be like Nick and Will,' he said. 'I want to hold my head high.'

'Nick?' she echoed. 'Do you want to be hard and cynical?' then as if the thought of Nick had disturbed her she jumped out of bed. 'You're going to miss that train,' she said.

David stretched his toes into the far corners of the bed and flexed the muscles of his back, then he picked up a towel and followed her into the bathroom.

She closed her eyes and thought about the wedding—'until death do us part' kept running through her mind. The words began to mean something—to mean 'for ever and ever'. She opened her eyes and looked round as if the thought were alive and in the room. She heard David walk into the steam-filled bathroom.

'Move up,' he said and put a leg in behind her. 'It's cold,' she said. 'Let's have some more hot then,' he said.

She stood up. 'It's all yours,' she said awkwardly and wrapped her body in a bath towel. As she closed the door on him he whispered: 'Oh hell!'

She dried herself and returned to their room. She saw the bed stripped of sheets, stripped of pillow-cases, blankets thrown over the easy chair and the big suitcase standing on end like a headstone over the grave of their wedding night. Her eyes grew moist with a quiet tear for David, so young, so untouched by life to be facing death for an ideal, and a tear for her own wedding night.

She dressed quickly in clothes which accentuated with a smooth discipline the line of her hips and her breasts. She slid on shoes a fine shade too high for utility. She carried a handbag but wore no hat. She looked alert,

intelligent, feminine, desirable, and expensive. She moved gracefully and without affectation.

'It's a good job I can trust you,' said David.

'I'd make a pass at the first man I saw if I thought it would keep you here,' she joked.

David walked up to her. The tone of his voice and the look in his eyes jolted her. 'Many a true word is spoken in jest,' he said.

'Not a sermon, please!' she said.

He carried her case and his own down to the hall. She saw the blonde receptionist watch him walk across, saw her put on a fetching smile as she checked his bill.

As they walked away she asked:

'Do you like blondes?'

'You're all I need,' he said.

They edged through the revolving doors, crossed the sunlit Saturday pavement of the main street over to the station approach. A man selling the *Daily Worker* thrust a copy into their faces. 'Ten years ago they were our enemies,' he cried.

David pushed it away. 'Not today,' he said, and walked on.

The paper-seller, a small thin man with a head too large for his narrow angular shoulders, watched Cathy walk down the slope until she disappeared beyond the range of his thick lenses. He licked his lips and flicked the paper in anger like a cat's tail.

'Did you notice who that was?' asked Cathy. David turned round and looked over his shoulder. The man was staring after them.

'Strefford!' said David.

'I thought it was pretty obvious,' said Cathy.

'A man's innocent isn't he?' asked David.

'Pity Will didn't see him,' said Cathy.

'It would make no difference to Will. That's what he calls freedom!'

'That's what you'll be fighting for!' said Cathy.

On the platform a big tough-looking sergeant stood by a kit-bag. He saluted Dave and smiled at Cathy.

'Hello, Butch,' said Cathy, 'keep an eye on him.'

'He'll be all right,' said Butch, his big mouth smiling wide with white teeth.

'I thought you said you didn't know Cathy?' asked David.

'She never looked at me,' said Butch.

'Always been a one-woman man!' said Cathy and felt a queasiness in her stomach. The voice over the Tannoy said: 'The train now arriving in No. 6 Platform is the ten o'clock London Euston train stopping at Crewe.'

'How long have you to serve, Butch?' she asked.

'Eighteen months, like "Sir",' he said, a twinkle in his eyes.

The train stopped and let off steam. Doors flung open and suitcases led passengers down on to the platform. David kissed her flush on the mouth. She clung to him with all her reservations relegated by the pain of the moment.

'I'll be back,' he said, his voice rough with emotion held in check. She felt the conventional bindings of his love burst and for a moment she hoped for a miracle, a miracle that would create passion, then he pushed her gently away. He smiled with understanding of a problem that was not her problem.

Butch looked down, his grey eyes steady. 'Don't worry, Cathy,' he said, 'Dave'll be back.' Then they were both gone. She looked up and down the corridor, then saw Dave's head wedge through a sliding window. She heard the dull noise of slammed doors, the rattle of trolley wheels and the hiss of steam echo around the curved glass station roof, a hollow, empty shell that felt

like her heart. She waved, she smiled, she bit her trembling lip and told herself she had promised away her life, that no matter what she did she was helpless, that nothing else could happen. She was married to a man who was going away to a war in the East.

The whistle blew and the train rolled silently as if the wheels were oiled by her tears. She watched until the train curved away out of sight. The station stood empty, as empty as her life. He'd gone too soon. They stood no chance. They'd made all the mistakes and had no time to learn.

She turned and walked away, handed her ticket to a collector's outstretched hand and climbed emptily up the slope past the taxis and the mail vans, past the long line of posters on the wall, back to the main street. At the corner Strefford stared at her through his thick-lensed spectacles. He fluttered his *Daily Worker* so that the headline waved before her eyes hypnotically. It said: 'Ten years ago they were our enemies!' Strefford looked at her with eyes full of implication as if he wanted to see amongst her innermost fears and hopes the impact of the headline. She stood a moment, stopped by a single thought. Her hunger for David was physical, like hunger for food, a food of which she had eaten only enough to create a hunger.

'They've taken him away from you,' called out Strefford. Cathy heard and nodded, but her nod meant nothing to anyone but herself. She started to hurry.

She climbed on a bus and chose the front seat so that her back was towards the other passengers.

Now she was alone, her marriage seemed no more tangible than a dream! She felt her last strength ebb away and leave naked fatigue. She wanted to talk to someone, someone who might understand, who might reassure her that even complete love needed patience, that often only time would bring fulfilment.

The bus stopped and started, stopped and started. She saw the sleek-fronted stores of the High Street replaced by long drab terraces of houses each with a shop on the corner, mean streets broken by factories, a grim bus-high front stretching for a cobbled mile to the park gates. Beyond the park stood Victorian houses with shallow roofs and split Greek pillars flanking the doors.

She jumped off the bus at the Holly Trees Hotel, crossed the road under the safety of the traffic lights, took the first right along the main road north and driven by her misery sought refuge along a quiet road lined with green trees and substantial houses.

She rang the bell and found herself facing Will on his crutches, white-haired, stubborn-chinned, kind-eyed. He balanced himself with the ease of long practice and held out his thin sensitive hands.

'I'm glad you came,' he said. 'David telephoned last night.'

'Who's that?' asked Bella, though she'd seen Cathy through the window.

'Catherine,' answered Will, then: 'Come in, my dear.'

'Who?' asked Bella again, leaving her flowers.

'Catherine, David's wife.'

'Oh, it is!' Catherine looked at Will.

He said: 'Now don't worry. Her bark's worse than her bite.' Cathy noticed he kept his voice pitched low.

Bella stood in the doorway waiting, then she made her entrance, open-armed, wide-smiled. 'My poor girl,' she said, 'what a way for a woman to be treated the day after her marriage. Still, he's that sort of a boy.' She walked around touching things here and there.

Cathy followed Bella unprotesting through the kitchen with Will one-legging it on his crutches. Shining white crockery stood waiting on the table in the breakfast alcove, and a cosy covered the teapot. Bella poured out.

'Two spoonfuls of sugar,' she said to Cathy.

'One . . .' said Cathy.

'Two,' said Bella, 'it's good for you, I think, after thirty years of marriage, not just one night.' She looked at Will, then at his crippled leg. 'He was a good man before his accident.'

Cathy wanted to say to Bella: 'I tried to make him happy, but you can't make anyone happy unless they can make you happy.'

They drank tea in silence until Bella said: 'You might have given us more notice.'

'I'm sorry.' •

'There's nothing we can do about it now. Though I would like to have been at my son's wedding.'

'I'm sorry,' said Cathy, 'but David had it all worked out.'

'Forget it,' said Bella. 'It's no good crying over spilt milk.'

'We've prepared a room for you,' said Will, tentatively. •

'Where are your bags?' asked Bella.

'It's very kind of you. . . .' Cathy hedged.

'It's what David would have wanted. He'll know you're safe here.'

Cathy took a deep breath. 'We thought we'd keep my flat on as a home when David returned.'

'Isn't this good enough for you?' asked Bella.

'Now Bella. . . .' said Will.

'I don't agree with Catherine staying in a flat by herself,' said Bella.

• 'Times have changed, Bella,' said Will.

'She's no longer single,' said Bella.

'Marriage means giving up some freedom.'

'Mrs. Duerden,' said Cathy. 'David and I decided that I should keep on the flat.'

Cathy looked at the narrow-lipped, self-righteous expression on Bella's face, and saw in it a likeness of David. For a moment, as she realized how little she

knew about David, her heart dropped a beat. She wanted to say: take him back, he's yours, all yours.

'We'll be only too glad to have you here,' said Will, pouring out the milk of his kindness. 'You might feel lonely. . . .'

'Milkman!' called a distant voice from the back door.

'Milkman!' said Bella. She took a purse from the table drawer and walked out through the kitchen.

'Thanks for the tea,' said Cathy, 'but I'm due at the factory.'

'Saturday?' asked Will.

'You're not going so soon?' called Bella.

'Catherine's working,' said Will.

'She's getting a marriage allowance, isn't she?'

'We're saving to buy a house,' said Cathy, very near to tears.

'I'm saving all the time,' said Bella, and looked round the door at the fashionable lines of Cathy's suit, 'but I make my own clothes,' and walked back into the kitchen. Will frowned and stared at his stricken leg.

'She doesn't mean half of it,' he said. Cathy smiled for his sake.

'Yes,' she said, and thought I've not married David's family. She followed Will to the door and out on to the path.

'I'll drive you to the factory,' he said.

'No,' she said, 'it's not far to the bus stop. I'd rather walk.'

She kissed him quickly on the forehead, but before she could run down the path she heard Bella say to herself: 'I made an effort for David's sake—but I knew it wouldn't work.'

Will took Cathy by the arm. 'It's not all her fault,' he said. His crutches grated over the ground. 'It's hard for a woman when her man's a cripple, especially when her nature's like Bella's.'

'I know,' said Cathy.

'I've seen her change,' he said.

'It's not all your fault, Will,' she said.

'She doesn't mean it,' he said. She kissed him on the cheek again.

'I'll try to understand,' she said.

'Look,' he said and pointed to the car. 'I was going to the factory myself later this morning. We'll both go together.'

'I'd better make a 'phone call then,' she said, 'from the kiosk.'

'I'll pick you up on the corner in five minutes,' said Will and asked no questions.

'All right,' she said and smiled.

Cathy walked in the sunlight. A window-cleaner watched her all the length of the street. The wind played with the short dark curls on her forehead. At the crossroads she halted, then stepped into a telephone kiosk. She dialled the factory, asked for Nick, David's brother.

'Mrs. Duerden speaking,' she said.

'Who?' asked the male voice in her ear.

'Mrs. Duerden,' she repeated.

'Is that Catherine?'

'You recognized my voice.'

'If you're not ill, why the hell aren't you at the office?'

'I've just been on my honeymoon.'

'Your what!'

'I've just been married. Didn't David tell you?'

'Look, Catherine. I can't think over the telephone. Are you joking?'

'No.'

'Who did you marry?'

'David.'

'David?'

'I'll explain everything when I reach the office,' she said and slowly replaced the receiver.

As she walked out of the box Will's shining limousine drew silently alongside the kerb. He opened the door for her, waited while she climbed in, offered her a cigarette, then drove smoothly away.

'One day you'll have sons of your own,' said Will.

Cathy nodded her head.

'I hope so,' she said.

'Do you mind talking about it?' he asked.

'I'll go mad if I don't talk to someone,' she said.

'You've known David a long time,' he said.

'Since our school-days,' she said. Will drove the car steadily at thirty miles an hour.

'Did you have any doubts after you married Bella?' asked Cathy.

'No,' said Will.

'Did she?' asked Cathy. Will frowned.

'I think,' he said, 'I think she did.'

'Yet you're kind, you love her and you've given her everything a woman could want.'

'I think she wanted something more, something I lacked.'

'Passion?' asked Cathy. Will didn't answer. They drove on in silence. Then Will, as if he'd deliberately shelved an unpleasant memory, changed the subject.

'You know,' he said, 'I told Nick and David to be courageous and honest and it has taken both of them away, Nick in '39, David now.' They drove in silence along the by-pass, then Will continued: 'I often wonder if I ought to have taught them survival at any price.'

'David's a fine boy,' she said.

'And Nick?' he asked.

'He's my boss,' she said.

'Nick joined up for the hell of it,' said Will. 'He doesn't give a damn for anything, except aeroplanes. He's crazy on flying.'

'The 101 in particular!' laughed Cathy.

'He'll never settle down,' said Will. Cathy said nothing but wondered what Will was getting at. She knew Will would rather have his tongue torn out than hint at anything and decided he was trying not to hurt her feelings.

'Nick's quite a man with the ladies,' said Will, frowning. He turned the car down the steep hill leading to the river and across the valley towards the factory and the airfield. He was obviously thinking about something.

'You know,' he said, 'when they were kids Nick used to be the one who took Dave's toys.'

'Aren't all kids built the same way?' she asked.

Will wouldn't be side-tracked.

'Yet Dave took you from Nick,' he said. Cathy laughed in self-defence.

'I still am Nick's secretary,' she said, 'if that's what you mean.'

'If you want to change your job I could arrange it,' Will said.

She could easily have agreed but instead she asked:

'You love David more than Nick?'

'I've tried to treat them both exactly the same,' he said.

'But David's your favourite?'

'Is it so obvious?'

'Call it—a woman's intuition.'

'Nick takes after his mother.' He's dark and fascinating like she was, while David's a poor honest plodder, like me.' Cathy closed her eyes. Will continued: 'Nick has the luck and charm of the devil. He never needed me.'

'But David would need you,' said Cathy, 'just as he needs me.'

'David had fears in the night which I knew too well. Then, when I lost the use of my leg, he helped me with his patience and strength and his love. Nick and Bella sought pleasure outside. David sat at my feet by the fireside and we talked.'

'And now we've both lost him,' said Cathy.

'Pray God not,' said Will.

'Couldn't you have stopped him?' she asked.

'That would have been a betrayal,' said Will.

He drove along the main road parallel to the longest runway and slowed down at the iron gates.

'God preserve him,' said Will as he halted. They showed passes, then the gates swung over the white concrete drive-in flanked by grass. Will drove at ten miles an hour to the administrative block fronting the centre hangar of the three which constituted the factory.

Will led the way up the stairs and she carried one of his crutches for him. At the top he turned left to his director's office and she went right to hers. She felt her confidence return. She was playing on her home ground. Her small office overlooking the airfield looked clean and efficient and reassuring. She was out of the wilderness. She touched up her hair at the window pane, then looked across the runway at the clean lines of the jet bomber rolling across the tarmac.

The office door opened and Nick walked across to her.

He took hold of her left hand, looked at the ring and said:

'So you weren't joking.'

'No,' she said.

'What the hell do you think you were doing?' he asked.

'I love him,' she replied. Nick stood tall and broad, leather faced, with firm wide lips.

'Does that mean you have to marry him?' he asked.

'Isn't that normal?' she asked.

'Why should it be?' he said.

'I have asked myself that,' she answered and frowned, 'but there are no reasons.'

'Did he ask you?'

'Yesterday.'

'Where is he now?' asked Nick.

'On his way out to the Far East.'

'Were you both sober?'

'Nick!'

'Did you *have* to marry him?'

'I'm not pregnant,' she said and turned away.

Nick walked across to the window.

'That's the way it goes,' he said. 'The first time I've been moral about a woman in my life—and I'm beaten to the punch!' He turned and kissed her on the forehead.

'Why didn't you tell me?' she asked.

'I've been too damn busy with the 101. I thought you were sensible.'

'I'm not psychic.'

'And I'm not the marrying type and what's more I don't think you are!'

'Then neither of us need worry.'

'Cathy,' he said, 'a new relationship opens up ahead.'

'What about David?'

'To hell with him. He knew the way I felt even if you didn't.'

'He's my husband.'

'We'll see,' he said and looked at her. She felt herself caught up in his eyes, felt strange changes take place inside her body.

'It's too late,' she said to herself, then shook her head and said out loud: 'It's too late!'

He walked through the door, sat down at his desk, pointed to a pile of correspondence and said:

'I suppose you want to lose yourself in work?'

She nodded her head. 'Get out now,' she thought, 'while you can,' but she stayed.

'By the way,' he said, 'how long's David away?'

'A year and a half.'

'That's the best news you've told me,' he said and picked up the top letter.

She said: 'You're turning the knife in the wound.'

'No,' he said, 'I'm being cruel to be kind,' then he

answered letters even faster than usual. Her fingers ached as the pencil scribbled shorthand across smooth paper, but in the ache she found relief. As he finished the last reply, he asked:

'Why did you come back here?'

'I don't know,' she said and looked at her pad.

'I'll tell you why. Because you're cursed with a body. You've letters after your name but you don't know your own nature. I can see right through to the desire smouldering in your limbs.'

'David loves me,' she said desperately.

'David's going away to fight in a war. He wants to leave a child in someone's womb. It helps him face the enemy,' said Nick.

'You can be cynical while you're safe in this office!' she said.

'That destroys all my arguments, I suppose.'

'It means you can't hope to understand.'

'There have been other wars,' he said, smiling. 'I remember writing a tragic poem to a girl just before I went overseas for the first time! But I didn't marry her. I wasn't so scared that I needed a woman to sustain me. I had the poem duplicated, and gave a copy to all my girls.'

'David's not like that!'

'How do you know what men are like?' he asked. He lit a cigarette. 'You'll not lose face by admitting you've made a mistake. I know David. I know you. I know fire and water don't mix. But you'll not admit it yet. All right. Stew in your own juice. I'll add the bitters.'

She said: 'You're talking like an adolescent.'

He smiled.

'David won't send you passionate letters, or poems, not even one he's cribbed from the *Golden Treasury*!'

'I think you're despicable.'

'Look, Cathy, enjoy the tragic rôle.'

in melancholy, but you'll get no sympathy from me. If I know David, he'll be out of his tragic dream world in time to enjoy himself at every port of call.'

'He will not!'

Nick flicked the letters aside and started to dictate again. He wrote minutes, compiled a report, drafted a memorandum and finished by asking her to cancel the table for two he had booked at Whinney's. 'We were going out,' he explained. Cathy made no comment.

The ease of his dictation and his clear thinking gave weight to his views on herself and David. She also felt depressed at facing an empty flat. She took her notes into her office, but before she started to type, Remington with his tall, thin, lopsided smile walked through the door.

'Is Nick in?' he asked, his head on one side.

'Yes, Mr. Remington.'

'I'll go right through.'

'I'd better check,' she said. She did.

'Will's in there as well, but you can go in,' she said.

Remington went straight through.

'Hello, Will, hello, Nick,' he said.

'Trouble?' asked Nick. Remington smiled. He had a thin mouth which lifted at the left corner and his head moved sideways so that his left eye was slightly higher than the right. He looked like a man examining a gift horse from a friend he knew too well, but still liked.

'Always trouble,' said Remington, his eyes steady.

'What is it,' asked Nick, 'this time?'

'You'll have to sack Strefford.'

'Why?' asked Will.

Remington sat down and prepared for a long siege. 'You can't employ a man who sells the *Daily Worker*, not in this aircraft factory anyway.'

'He's a good worker,' said Will.

'There are others as good.'

'He's done nothing wrong,' said Will.

'We'd look damn silly if he did,' said Remington.

'I've looked damn silly before,' said Will.

'It's not just you I'm worried about,' Remington said, 'other people ride in aircraft.'

'Is every man who sells the *Daily Worker* a saboteur?' asked Will.

'It's the first step. He has the incentive, the opportunity and the means at his disposal. It's too much to risk,' said Remington.

'Have you any daughters?' asked Nick and propped his feet on the table.

'One.'

'Don't allow her to go out with men.'

'Why not?'

'They all have the incentive, the opportunity, the means. . . .'

'Let's be serious, Nick. I don't like this any more than you do, but we must face facts.'

'And leave no stone unturned!' laughed Will. 'No, Strefford stays. I trust him. He's an Englishman until you can prove he's a Russian spy, and I mean prove!'

Cathy, her fingers still pecking at the typewriter, nodded as Remington walked out. Towards six o'clock she took in the letters for signature.

'Is that all?' she asked.

'I'll run you home,' Nick said, 'put your coat on.'

They walked down to his car, drove to the gates, showed passes, posted the letters, then sped down the hill across the flat-bottomed valley over the river and up the hill into town. He drove in silence. He had eighteen months' grace.

Cathy's flat was in the attic of a large house on the coast side of the town. Nick stopped the car outside the gate. As she closed the door he said:

'I didn't hear you cancel the table at Whinney's.'

She blinked and smiled. 'No,' she said, 'I forgot. . . .'

'Never mind,' he said. 'I'll remember,' and drove off.

Cathy lifted one tired foot after the other up the last narrow flight of stairs, scraped the key home and flopped into the nearest chair. She levered off her shoes by the heel, sighed as her instep breathed in the cool air, then stared at the big bookcase. She still felt lonely, but despite the complicated background of her uncertainty, she found herself thinking about Nick, not question and answer, not cause and effect, not trying to add things up as she did with David, but a disturbing sensation, deep, and physical; a hunger, a craving which she had to stamp on. She walked restlessly around the flat, stared at a calendar on the wall and looked at the days in a month, in a year, in a year and a half. Then she looked at the clock and listened to her heart thumping in her chest.

She ran to her desk in the lounge and started a letter to David. She thought of ports of call and laughed. She half hoped he would cut loose, but she knew he wouldn't. She thought of Bella, of mothers and sons, and wondered what sort of letters they wrote to each other. She brooded over the first sentence for half an hour, then wrote everything down as it poured out. She filled nine pages, the last two by the light from the street lamp through the window. She left the lot in the top drawer to be read when sanity returned with the morning sun. She waited for sleep to hasten away the first twenty-four hours, but though her limbs ached and her eyes were raw at the rims, she could only crumple the sheets or stare through the black-barred window. She heard the distant clock chime three then finally lost herself in restless sleep.

She wrote to David each night and posted one in three and waited for the replies. For a month none came, then seven fluttered through the letter-box at once. She read six at a sitting, six which read like theses for

a degree in political philosophy, discourses why a man should fight for freedom, for his country, against aggression, to prove his manhood, to gain immortality and to overcome cowardice. She read on and her shoulders sank lower and her head drooped like a dying tulip. She paused before opening the seventh. She thought of Nick's poems and understood how rogues gained their successes. She wanted David to conjure a vision with words to show they were both sharing the same experience—words that would destroy her doubts. She looked at the seventh letter then opened it with fingers already limp with disappointment. She read slowly a description of the heat and the smells of Suez contrasted with cool drinks at the French club. As she walked to the bus stop, she wondered if David were refraining deliberately from aggravating her emotions. By the time she reached the office she had decided that David was very wise, but when she saw Nick she realized that wishful thinking gave no comfort. At the best David just didn't know how to maintain a hold over a woman. At the worst, he was wrapped in his own problems.

For over a month Nick had driven her home each evening. He had been polite. Each night the solitude of her empty flat grew more unbearable. One month became three and her problem became more intense. The tension between them increased.

CHAPTER TWO

NICK thought but only for a moment that he was being more of a swine than usual. He had noted the signs correctly. The time for action had arrived. Very soon the tension would start to dissipate itself.

Then it would be too late. He sat at his desk, coat off and shirt sleeves rolled up. The sun's rays bounced aggressively off the hangar walls and in through the wide windows.

'We'll boil this afternoon,' he said.

'I'm ready for a holiday,' she said, and flicked shut the curled leaves of her shorthand note-book.

'I thought you were,' he said softly.

'What?' she asked.

'Living like a nun,' he said.

'I've not much choice.'

'Pity you can't see yourself!' he said. He kept his face straight though he wanted to smile at her reaction.

'What do you mean?' she asked.

'You're still allowed to enjoy yourself, aren't you, or do you like being miserable?'

'I'm not miserable,' she said.

'Lucky for you we're not in the Thirty Years' War . . .'
he said.

'That's not funny.'

'Do you really feel like a break . . .?' he asked.

'I'd like to get away from everything,' she said.

'Would you like a trip to the sea?'

'When?'

'If we race through the work, we can go early this afternoon.'

'You mean if I slog through this!' she said and flicked her note-book.

• He nodded his head.

'They'll be ready by four o'clock,' she said. At the door she halted, paused, then said slowly: 'Way back, I had some letters from David.'

'Any poetry?' he asked. She looked at the smile wrinkling his eyes and quirking his mouth and wondered how much he guessed.

'He'd been ashore at Suez,' she said.

'Suez! That's quite a spot.'

'He wrote all about it.'

'So what's good for the goose is good for the gander!' he laughed.

'No,' she said. 'He's in Korea now.'

'Any Red Cross girls out there?' he asked.

'He didn't mention any.'

'Wise man, David,' he said.

She closed the door.

She typed steadily through the morning, ate two sandwiches, and worked on through the lunch hour. She didn't question why she had created the opening for Nick's offer or why she was obsessed with the idea of a chariot racing madly downhill.

Precisely at four o'clock she tapped on his door and entered. He signed the letters without checking for mistakes.

'Once you examined every word,' she said.

'Once you made mistakes,' he replied. He stood up. 'I'll meet you down at the car,' he said. She stood looking at him. 'Go on!' he said. She returned to her office, enveloped the letters, stuck down the flaps and wandered slowly down the stairs to his car parked at the kerb. She looked across the empty airfield then turned sharply and, for no reason, stared at the nearest hangar door straight into the face of Strefford. He made no attempt to disguise his interest in her and stayed there until Nick came out five minutes later. He watched both of them drive away. At the gate they showed passes and posted the mail. Nick noticed nothing, but roared away with the wind rising warm off the hot roads, over the hot bonnet, curling over the windscreen into the hoodless car, streaming through Cathy's hair, pulling at her blouse, but not blowing away her doubts.

'This is the way you should always look,' said Nick,

driving with some of Will's beautiful anticipation that transformed corners into smooth curves. On the outskirts of the town she said:

'Can we call at my flat?'

'Why?'

'I'd like to collect a swimsuit and a towel.'

'They're in the back,' he said. They drove on in silence for a while, then she said:

'Happy coincidence!'

'Organization,' he said.

'How long have you been planning this outing?'

Nick listened to the car engine tick over, looked at the red stop light, then at Cathy.

'If you want to be exact, the day after you were married.'

'You're honest anyway.'

'Sometimes.'

'Why today?'

'I don't like eating green apples.'

'What colour am I now?'

'Peach.'

'No longer a prune stewing in my own juice?'

'What else could I do?'

'I'd like to know how you tested me for ripeness?'

'Take the fruit between finger and thumb and give it a good pinch,' he said, but didn't. Nevertheless, she jumped and laughed.

'If it's sour you know right away,' he said.

'What then?' she asked, aware of a slight forcing of the question, a certain breathlessness.

'I don't know,' he said. 'Reason breaks down when there are so many unknown factors. It's a matter of going step by step, slowly and gently, like stalking a very young and timid little rabbit.'

'For the pot,' she laughed.

'Or to keep as a pet,' he said.

They covered the eighteen miles to the coast in twenty minutes.

'You can smell the sea,' said Cathy long before they reached the promenade. The tide was half-way out and a long wide stretch of golden sand was alive with children and donkeys. Nick drove miles further to the sand-dunes, parked the car, took two huge towels out of the boot and threw one to Cathy. She kicked off her shoes, slipped out of her stockings and ran bare-footed up the nearest sandhill and stood silhouetted and laughing against the sky.

'The sand's burning my feet!' she called.

They changed under canopies of towelling, set their bodies free in the warm wind and the hot sun and walked unself-consciously towards the distant line of the sea. They reached a long pool of stranded seawater. Cathy flicked the water with her foot. So did Nick. They looked at each other like children just out of Sunday School, then she ran, high stepping over the splashes, laughing with exhilaration, and collapsed breathless with water droplets shining like jewels on her cheeks and running like liquid silver down her shoulders.

'This is heavenly,' she said and looked into blue sky.

'You've earned it,' he said and knelt down. 'You're young, you're beautiful, you should be happy.' He knelt beside her and looked into her eyes, then added with a devil playing twinkle stars in his eyes, 'Occasionally it's good for the mice to play.'

She looked at her toes breaking the surface at the end of refracted legs. Nick grabbed a foot and pulled. She turned over like a hooked salmon and beat the water and laughed and pleaded and shouted. As soon as he took pity she turned on him. He saw murder in her eyes and ran wide-armed away. She chased him the length of the pool. He stood on the wet sand.

'Pax?' he asked. She nodded.

'Let's build a castle!' he said. They patted and scraped and dug a moat, they built battlements, while slowly and remorselessly the sun sank towards the horizon. She watched his hands, muscular, well-shaped, strong yet with a certain beauty of movement. She felt as if she were drifting on a slow deep river of anticipation.

She shivered as he touched her shoulder with the palm of his hand. It rested there a moment.

'You're cold,' he said.

'No, I'm quite all right.'

'It's time to go,' he said and stood up.

'The sea will wash our castle away,' she said.

'That's life,' he said, and smiled.

'You know,' she said, 'you're tough and strong and not a bit afraid of deep water, yet you seem determined to stay on the surface.'

'Once I went down as far as I could go,' he said. 'I couldn't touch the bottom. It was a waste of time.'

'Yet you fly higher and higher.'

'That's life,' he said and laughed with full unrestrained lungs.

They cleaned themselves in the pool and trudged towards their clothes and the car.

'What is it?' he asked, '*hoi à la polloi* at the Ritz or fish and chips in a newspaper?'

'Champagne and oysters,' she said, 'nothing less.'

'Are you very hungry?'

She nodded vigorously. 'I could eat . . .' but the word froze for a moment on her tongue as their eyes met. 'You,' she whispered as if hypnotized. Then she looked at her feet and brushed the dried sand from her legs. He gripped her by the arms above the elbow.

'Listen, Cathy,' he said, his voice rough and pitched low. 'I have you now. I know it's not for long, but while he's away I want you. I'm closing my mind to David's return, hoping for a miracle.' He kissed her

on the lips and she didn't resist. She closed her eyes to everything but her emotions and the sweet delight that flowed between their touching limbs. A stragggle of cyclists whistled as they rode by. The tail-ender shouted over his shoulder:

'Why don't you go behind the dunes!' then collided with the kerb. Nick laughed.

'We'd better change,' said Cathy, regaining her balance.

'I suppose we'd better,' said Nick and laughed again.

'The winged horses,' said Cathy.

'What?' said Nick.

'Oh, nothing,' said Cathy.

They drove along the promenade following the tracks made by the cyclists on the sand-sprinkled road.

'That looks nice,' said Nick and pointed to a well-lit, long-windowed café, silhouetting a newspaper boy. Nick had slowed and stopped before he saw the placard:

BIG OFFENSIVE ON EVE OF TRUCE TALKS.

He felt her arm go limp as they passed by. He led her to a corner table.

'David'll be in that,' he said, 'but worrying won't help either of you.'

'I'm his wife.'

'Do you still believe in two people being made for each other?'

'No,' she said, 'but I'm still his wife.'

'Why worry? If he comes back, he comes back. If he doesn't, I'll be around. You can't lose.' To save time, Nick ordered the most expensive meal on the big menu and hoped it was also the best. He wanted to talk to Cathy, not the blasted waiter.

'I owe David more than that,' she said.

'So do I,' said Nick, 'a thick ear.' She smiled.

'You don't like him?' she asked.

'I like him better now than I've ever done.'

'Oh God, I've made a mess of my life!' she said, 'but . . .

'But what?' Nick asked.

'He didn't hesitate—you did,' she said.

'There are times when I think you're a shallow, stupid little bitch, worth neither my time nor my energy.'

'I'm sorry,' she said.

'You'll never make anyone a good bedmate—while you let your conscience ride you.'

'You, for instance?'

'Aye,' he said. 'You know you've got me. But don't bank on it too much. Maybe I'll tire of you after we've shared a bed.' A little hatred tinged his love. He wanted to make her suffer as he had. Then he laughed at his pettiness. 'Do you trust me enough to share a bottle of wine?' he asked.

'I trust you,' she said.

'I think you're wrong,' he said, and ordered a Slovene Riesling. 'Just shows how little you know about men.'

'If there's an armistice, he might be home soon,' she said.

'Don't build on that either,' he said.

'He'll find a way.'

'Look, dear,' he said, 'I didn't buy wine to stimulate talk about David.'

'I'm sorry,' she said.

The waiter delivered chicken, bowed, served and carried away empty platters.

'How'd you like a trip to Ascot?' he asked. She looked up.

'I've nothing to wear.'

'Is that a reason against going?'

'When?'

'Next week.'

'It's tempting.'

'It's meant to be.'

'What else?'

'Stay a night or two and travel back the following day.'

'What about the 101?' she asked.

'I wouldn't go away, even for you, if the 101 needed me,' he said.

'Separate bedrooms?'

'If you insist.'

'I think I'd better.'

'You might change your mind.'

'No,' she said. 'Nick, if I wanted that, it would be you and no one else.'

'I feel like an eagle reduced to picking up crumbs.' He drained his glass, topped up hers and refilled his own.

'I wonder,' she said, 'if a woman ever has all the sides of her personality satisfied by one man?'

'A woman should only have one side,' said Nick.

When the meal ended he asked: 'What now—a show or a pub crawl?'

'You'd rather crawl round the pubs,' she said.

'Aye,' he said, 'and drink pints.'

'I'll have a half to your pint,' she said.

'Is that a challenge?' he asked.

'It's more than a challenge,' she said, and then looked him straight in the eye and he could see no veils.

'Question not what the gods offer,' he said and paid the bill.

'We'll take the country roads,' he said, turning down a narrow lane, 'try our luck on the dart boards, and end up at the "Running Buck".'

'Must we see Strefford?' she asked.

'He's a good dart player,' he said.

'Yes,' she agreed, without enthusiasm.

'He might not be there,' he said.

'I don't like him.'

'Have you anything against him?' he asked.

'No.'

'Good, then we'll beat him up at darts.'

The fresh-faced landlord greeted them with a friendly wave from behind his counter.

'Back again, sir,' he said to Nick, and then gave Cathy a special smile. 'You both look very fit tonight,' then he saw the ring. 'Congratulations,' he said.

'It's not what you think,' said Nick, 'she married my brother.'

'I'm sorry,' said the landlord.

'So am I,' said Nick and laughed, then ordered a pint and a half.

'Can we get on the board?' he asked.

'Certainly, sir. Mr. Strefford!' the landlord called, 'here's your chance for revenge!' Cathy frowned and drew back but Nick appeared not to notice.

'I feel in form tonight,' Nick said and glanced across the room. In the corner, playing dominoes, his eyes shining through thick-lensed spectacles, sat Strefford.

'I'll finish this hand,' he said and looked at Cathy and licked his red lips with a pointed tongue. He lost his hand deliberately, stood his round and brought his partner to join Nick and Cathy.

'Middle for diddle,' said Nick and plonked a barrel of a dart in the bull. Strefford poised a slim arrow, shot well, but it glanced off Nick's.

'Away we go,' said Nick and pierced the double twenty with his third dart.

'Your luck's in,' said Strefford and narrowly missed double nineteen with a cluster.

Cathy threw her darts all over the board. 'Eighteen,' she called, her voice tight with strain.

'Worried about something?' asked Strefford, then, 'Come on, Sebastian, here's a chance for you to step in.'

Sebastian was a tubby man whose fat concealed strength rather than an uncontrolled appetite. He threw his darts one—two—three in quick succession like

machine-gun bullets. How he took aim was a mystery but all three lay like maggot-eggs across double thirteen.

'Have you read the evening papers?' asked Strefford, as Nick took aim. Nick shot his first dart, then said: 'No.'

'The local regiment seems to be in the thick of the fighting,' said Strefford. Cathy stared fixedly at the dart board. Nick took careful aim, then said:

'Is it?'

'Heavy casualties,' said Strefford. Nick threw the third dart.

'Sixty,' he said.

'Good shooting,' said Sebastian.

'My brother's out there,' said Nick, 'but it's no good panicking.'

'I feel queer,' said Cathy. 'Could you throw for me?' She sat down. Nick wanted to stay at her side.

'No,' she said, 'finish the game.' Strefford passed a quick look to his partner, Sebastian.

'Aren't you going to make a fight of it, Mrs. Duerden?' Sebastian asked.

'Isn't your husband in the local regiment?' asked Strefford.

Cathy stood up and walked into the women's lavatory.

'Your remarks were ill-timed,' said Nick. He looked from Sebastian to Strefford. Neither of them apologized. He sensed behind their eyes insolent confidence.

'What's on the game?' he asked.

'This game?' asked Sebastian, and nodded at the board.

'Is there another one?' asked Nick.

'You should know,' said Sebastian.

'A pint?' said Strefford. Nick nodded. He threw with great concentration, but the points chose the wrong side of the wire. Strefford made no mistakes. Luck ran in his favour and he finished on double thirteen.

Nick ordered the beer as Cathy returned, a half smile on her lips in apology for her weakness.

'No more for me, please,' she said.

'There's no danger in losing—while you have the money to pay,' said Sebastian. Nick looked at the landlord.

'If I was broke,' he asked, 'would my credit be good?'

The landlord laughed. He reached under the counter and pulled out a dog-eared note-book.

'Debts,' he said, 'and half of 'em weren't even regulars!' He threw it back under.

'Cheers,' said Nick. 'Now I've got used to your barracking, I'll take you on and beat you.'

Cathy watched the game. It was obvious from the start that Nick would win. His darts thudded home remorselessly. Neither Strefford's thin shafts nor Sebastian's quick one—two—three were as convincing.

'One apiece,' said Strefford.

'The conqueror?' asked Sebastian.

'Some other time,' said Nick. He waved to the landlord and led Cathy out.

'I had a feeling about going there,' said Cathy once the car was moving.

'What do you know about Strefford?'

'He watched me say good-bye to David at the station.' She turned and gripped Nick by the arm. 'I wonder if David's still alive. Oh Nick,' she said, and buried her face, 'what's going to happen?'

'Call me father,' said Nick.

'I wish you were,' she said.

'Then we'd all live happily together, you, me and David!'

'Be serious, Nick,' she said.

'Let's be honest,' said Nick. 'This stuff doesn't fool me. You have by happy chance, one man and a boy on a string. The law says you can only marry one. You've

chosen Dave, but while he's away you turn to me, of your own free will. To complicate things, you start to worry about what people will think.' He felt her draw away as he spoke. 'So you have to pretend to be heartbroken.'

'I am heartbroken,' Nick laughed and shook his head. 'You don't love me,' she said. 'All you want is. . . .'

'That's right,' he said, 'your beautiful body.'

'When I need a friend. . . .'

'Look, angel,' he smiled, 'you're not fooling me! You don't need to fool me. I've no morals.' She turned and beat him on the chest with both fists. He started laughing. She stopped and sat far away in the corner.

'I hate you,' she said. 'Take me home.'

'It wouldn't be proper for us to sleep together tonight,' said Nick, 'would it?'

'Will you take me home?' she asked.

'I'll think about it.'

The car halted at a traffic light in the town centre.

'You can drop me here,' she said, opened the door, stepped out and walked away. He watched her climb on to a bus and wondered if she'd have been so eager if there had been no bus waiting.

He was alone and still sober so he drove to the Reform Club, the most exclusive in town. A handful of business men stood round the brown, smoke-stained bar listening to the eleven o'clock news. Nick recognized Sergeant Butch Mathers' father.

'Heard from David?' asked Mr. Mathers.

'What's wrong?' asked Nick.

'I've had a telegram from Butch. He's wounded, on his way home. You know he was David's sergeant. . . .'

'I've heard nothing,' said Nick.

'They didn't waste much time,' said someone.

'We must give our boys a civic reception when they

get back,' said the Mayor. Nick shivered, cold with premonition.

'When's Butch expected?' he asked.

'I don't know. The telegram said he was on his way home by air. He might be somewhere in England already.'

'I think I'd better make a 'phone call,' said Nick. He put three coins in the box and dialled his father.

'Will,' he asked, 'who's David's next of kin, you or Cathy?'

'It's arrived,' said Will, his voice threadbare.

'What happened?'

'He's missing.'

'Does Cathy know?'

'We couldn't get her. Nick, come round and see Bella . . . she's out of her mind.'

'All right, Will, I'm coming. Remind Bella she worried when I was missing. Tell her we're a lucky family.'

'We all knew they couldn't kill you,' said Will.

'But you're not so certain about Dave, is that it?' asked Nick.

'Be as quick as you can, Nick.'

'I'm calling on Catherine. I'll bring her round too.'

He avoided the bar, and drove carefully to Cathy's flat. He telephoned from the box on the corner, told her it was important.

'I don't believe you,' she said.

'It's about David.'

'Oh!' she said. He hung up, ran down the road, up the path and pressed on the bell. There was no play-acting in her wide eyes when she opened the door.

'Let's go inside,' said Nick. She climbed the stairs in front of him, walked into the lounge, stood in the centre of the room and turned her face towards him. She was very pale and held her arms stiff at the elbows and her hands clasped tightly.

'David's missing,' he said.

She turned slowly away as if it hadn't sunk in properly, then she turned and said, her voice hushed:

'I don't believe it. He can't be. He was sleeping in my arms, like a baby.'

'The telegram said he was missing, not killed.'

'Which telegram?'

'The one Will and Bella received.'

'Poor Bella,' she said and sat down and closed her eyes.

'Pack a bag and I'll take you round there.'

'I'll stay here,' she said, and opened her eyes. She sat there in silence as the minutes trailed by. Then she said:

'Thank you for coming, Nick.'

Nick said: 'Butch Mathers is on his way home by air—wounded.'

She nodded her head, but he wasn't certain that she had understood. 'He might be able to tell us something,' he added. He took her by the shoulder. 'If it helps at all, Cathy, we're a lucky family.' He walked slowly towards the door. 'Are you sure you'll be all right?' he asked.

She nodded.

'It's not a bit like I expected,' she said. 'I just can't believe it.' Then she started to sob silently, saying: 'Poor, poor David,' then sobbing again. Nick walked up to her and shook her roughly by the shoulders.

'Make certain you're crying for David,' he said, 'and not to ease your own conscience.' Then he walked out. She stopped crying and shook her head. Her tears would not help David.

Bella sat upright in an armchair staring into the empty fireplace, her eyes circled with dark shadows, her nose red and pinched looking. A deep breath like a lost soul shuddered from her chest. Will looked through the window down the drive-in to the road, waiting, waiting, knowing time alone would deaden Bella's pain,

hoping that Nick would arrive soon. He saw headlights sweep the underside of the leaves on the trees.

'Here's a car,' he said. Bella, the key to her nature transformed from aggression to a shocked, sorrowful uncertainty, nodded her head and looked at Will as if she were a dog grateful for a kind word. The car lights dipped and a dark figure strode through the gates.

'It's Nick,' said Will, hopping to the door.

Nick gripped Will by the shoulder.

'How's Bella?' he asked.

'Thank God, you've come,' Will said, then: 'Have you seen Cathy?'

'She's staying at home.' He walked across to Bella. 'Your sons lead you a hell of a life,' he said, his tone making no allowances for her pitiful appearance.

'It's no use, Nick,' she said, 'I've known this all along.'

'Did you know I would return?' Nick asked.

'I always knew you would survive. You're like me. The Devil looks after his own.'

'Thanks,' said Nick, 'and what does that make Father?'

'Your mother blames me. She says David believed what I told him, that my ideals of courage and honesty led him to his death, while I sit here, alive.'

'If you'd let me bring up the boys this would never have happened,' said Bella. 'I'd never have filled their heads with ideals. I'd have told them the truth.'

'Now, Bella,' said Will.

'He was too good to live,' said Bella.

'What a lot of bloody nonsense,' said Nick. 'I think you're both round the bend. David's missing. That's all we know. And as for David being an angel—the little bastard was as bad as I was—only when he was found out, he always said he was sorry.'

'Nay, I'll not have that,' said Will.

Nick laughed and said:

'Do you think he was too stupid to think for himself? Do you think he accepted as gospel every standard you set down?'

'We believed in the same things,' said Will.

'Like hell you did!' said Nick.

'I wish I had taught him to be selfish and cowardly and deceitful. Then he'd have been alive now,' said Will.

Nick picked up a photograph of Will and David together.

'You didn't *make* David,' he said. 'You're only his father and his mother—not God.'

'Wait till you're a father,' said Bella.

'I have umpteen illegitimate children in sixteen different countries,' said Nick, 'I am a father.'

'You're only trying to take our minds off David,' said Bella, 'it's kind of you.'

'Is all this misery helping David?' asked Nick. 'No, you two are the only ones it's helping. You feel responsible for David. Well, you're only his parents. What David does with his life is between himself and the Almighty.'

'I never knew you were religious,' said Will.

'I am when it's useful!'

'You'll never change,' Bella said and smiled.

'That's better,' said Nick. 'You know, you might give me a complex making this fuss over David and not caring a tuppenny damn when I was missing!'

'Do you think he's alive?' she asked.

'All we know is that he's missing. We'll find out more as soon as his sergéant returns. He's flying home.'

'When?' asked Bella.

'He's on his way,' said Nick.

'You know,' said Will, 'there's no man-made code that'll guide you safely through life.'

Nick gave Will a sharp look and said:

'It's time you were both in bed.'

'If you're tired,' said Bella to Nick, 'go home.'

'We don't need much sleep at our age,' said Will.

They watched Nick walk out, heard his car start and listened to the silence after it had gone.

'He's not changed since the day he was born,' said Bella. 'He never wanted cuddling like David.'

Sergeant Butch Mathers arrived at the Military Hospital a week later minus his left leg chopped off below the knee. He told everyone who sympathized with him that he was one of the lucky ones.

On the first day his father saw him. His next visitor was Nick who placed a brown-paper parcel in his locker and said: 'Cigarettes and a half bottle of Scotch.' Butch smiled. He looked young and clean, but a young man no one would push around. Deep in his eyes was the look of a man who has been mortally afraid, but they were steady and his lips were firm.

'Thanks', he said, then: 'You want to know about David?' Nick looked older as the smile left his face.

'Aye,' he said..

Butch watched his fingers playing battlefields on the white counterpane covering his stomach. He frowned very slightly and his voice spoke as if his mouth was dry.

'The shell,' he said, 'fell between us. We were ten yards apart. I saw the flash, then the next thing I knew I was lying on a stretcher at a clearing station.'

Nick nodded his head and waited for a long pause, as if Butch was fighting a battle inside himself once again.

'They told me my officer was wounded badly and that he ordered them to take me.' Nick felt his teeth gritting and the tears of pride behind his eyes. He nodded and waited.

'The Chinese over-ran the position before the orderlies could return.'

'So he was alive?' Nick asked. Butch shook his head slowly.

'It's no use hoping,' he said, 'they left him behind because he died.'

'Aye,' said Nick. He wanted to lay his hands on the murdering bastards who'd killed David. He felt unreason and hate grow like a roaring fire in a high wind, blazing through the dry undergrowth of dead ideals. For a moment they burnt white hot, then all was black ash.

'He was a fine officer,' said Butch.

'Time's up,' said the nurse.

'Could you face his wife?' asked Nick, cold and shaken.

'I'd like to see her again,' said Butch.

'Look after yourself,' said Nick and walked out of the ward. He'd lost David. And Cathy was a widow but he could do nothing about it, not now David was dead. Then he laughed. Once . . . he thought.

Within the week Cathy called on Bella—at Nick's suggestion. She rang the door-bell and waited. When Bella opened the door Cathy stood wide-eyed at the change. Bella, once full of life, aggressive, self-assured, now stood before her, thin, colourless, round-shouldered and dressed in shapeless black.

'Bella!' said Cathy impulsively, and put her arms around the frail aged woman.

Bella allowed Cathy to make a cup of tea and sat looking at the carpet for long periods. Cathy watched the clock, wondering what she could decently say.

'I'm glad you made him happy on his last leave,' said Bella, out of the blue. Cathy didn't know what to say. 'But,' continued Bella in a precise quiet voice, 'I think in honour of his memory you ought to wear black,' then she scuttled out of the room. Cathy sat unnerved. A moment later Bella returned.

'I'm sorry,' she said, 'we mustn't quarrel. That's the last thing David would want us to do.'

'And neither of us could win now,' said Cathy.

'Has he spoken to you?' asked Bella, her eyes looking beyond Cathy as though someone unseen stood behind her shoulder.

'No. . . . ' said Cathy.

'He speaks to me,' said Bella.

Cathy put her arm round Bella.

'He wants you to live a full life. He doesn't want you to sacrifice your life, like I sacrificed mine,' said Bella. 'I made Will what he is, but I never loved him.'

She stared at the carpet, untouchable in the citadel of her own thoughts.

Cathy finished her cup of tea, saw Bella was in a world of her own, so she left the room quietly.

CHAPTER THREE

NICK had seen enough of death in the last war to know it was just one of those things. Sooner or later it came to everyone. For his part he worked all the harder on the 101, partly in an effort to forget David, partly to forget Catherine. He visited Bella every evening, then drank six pints of beer as a nightcap. He kept his sorrow to himself and agreed once more with his wartime philosophy that death was a bridge to cross only when it was reached.

Three months later on a Friday evening he drove Cathy back to her flat. She showed him a letter from David's Commanding Officer. It was a fine moving letter. It repeated what Butch Mathers had told Nick—that the two orderlies had only left David because he

was dead. Nick stared at the writing long after he had read it.

'Did you ever go to Ascot?' Cathy asked, 'or some other place?' Nick looked as if he'd been slapped in the face.

'Why?' he asked.

'I'd like to go,' she said, 'if the offer's still open.'

'Are you serious?' he asked.

'I made him happy while he was alive. All I want now is to forget. Every face I meet, every place I go in this town reminds me, so if you've any love for me, take me away.' She walked to the window. 'Or are you worried about what people will think!'

'People?' laughed Nick. 'Will you be ready when I return?'

'I can't face the town,' she said.

'I didn't ask you to. Just be ready to travel this evening.'

'The sooner the better,' she said.

Cathy sat alone with her suitcases and wondered what life was all about. She stared over the roof-tops and thought about David. She had read his last letters again and again. She realized that he had been trying to prepare her for a moment like this. His letters told her he was fighting for his country, a country that believed in freedom and hated aggression. She shook her head. He had died believing in those things. Thank God she'd made him happy.

She saw Nick's car creep along the kerb. She opened the door and thought he looked tired. 'We can't drive overnight,' she said, and felt a great tenderness as she realized that, despite all his cynical talk, he too had loved David. 'You've flogged yourself to comfort everyone,' she said.

'I'm still alive,' said Nick, and smiled.

'You need a rest. I should have realized before. Put your feet up on the couch while I make some tea.'

Nick smiled wryly.

'I'm ~~shot~~,' he said.

'No one remembered how close to each other David and you were,' she said.

'We were until he pinched my girl friend!' said Nick.

'I suppose it was my fault.'

'You turned both our heads,' said Nick and closed his eyes before he repeated, softly: 'Thank God in a way you did.'

When Cathy returned with the tray she found Nick asleep. She knelt down, lifted his dragging arm from the carpet and brushed her lips across his cheek. She covered him with a rug, then watched him from an easy chair. At dusk she ran down to the roadway and parked the car in the drive. A moment after she had closed the door the telephone rang.

'Catherine Duerden,' she said, then, 'Yes, he's here. Who wants him?'

'We played darts together,' said the voice in her ear. 'My name is Sebastian.' Cathy remembered the barrel-shaped man.

'You want to speak to Nick?' she asked.

'No,' said Sebastian, the telephone putting a hard edge to his drawl. 'He doesn't seem to have wasted any time.'

'What do you mean!' said Cathy.

Then the line went dead.

She replaced the receiver and pressed her hand down on it as if to prevent it moving.

After her anger had cooled she covered Nick with another blanket and went to bed herself, but did not sleep.

The following morning, after a very early breakfast, they drove along clean, country roads, heading south all the time, lunching at a quiet inn. They talked about crops, houses, horses, the smoke-drift from industrial towns, anything and everything they happened to see.

In the afternoon they drew up outside a long low hotel with gabled roofs and white walls, and small windows overlooking the river.

'I've booked two rooms, on different floors, in our own names,' said Nick. Cathy smiled.

'I hardly recognize you!' she said and followed him across the gravel car-park into the dark interior of the pub.

'If we bathe and change quickly we'll see some of today's racing,' he said.

The landlord and landlady were both kind and understanding, having been well briefed by Nick. But the chambermaid, who led Cathy up the stairs, said: 'Isn't he a smasher!'

'I suppose so!' said Cathy.

'The way he looks at you, makes you weak at the knees.'

'Does it?'

'I see a lot of men, all sorts, in my job.'

'How interesting.'

'They have put you a long way apart,' she said to Cathy when they had reached a small room facing the river.

'We wanted it that way,' said Cathy.

'You're not sleeping with your husband then?'

'He's not my husband.'

'Didn't think he was!' said the chambermaid.

'You may go,' said Cathy, beginning to lose interest.

She lay down on the bed. She felt beautifully calm, as if all her problems were resolved.

Nick waited patiently in the bar and smiled as she walked across the hall. 'He gave her a newspaper. 'Choose yourself a winner,' he said. She looked through the eight-page racing edition.

'All horses, fashions, cricket and pretty girls,' she said and rustled the paper. 'Not a mention of the war.'

'Cathy, we could have been miserable at home. Now just you pick a winner.'

'I'm not miserable—just disillusioned. David was a fool as well as a hero.' She looked at the meaningless names, then one struck a chord. 'Lonely Widow!' she said.

'Hopeless,' he said, 'she hasn't a chance.'

'Lonely Widow,' she said, 'you asked for a horse!'

He drove quietly towards the race-course. In the distance they saw the grandstands packed with women in bright hats and dresses and men in open-necked shirts. More and more people seemed to be walking on the roads. Progress slowed to a crawling pace until eventually they parked the car.

'Can I sit here?' she asked.

'Don't you want a seat in the stands?' he said. She shook her head.

'I'd much rather stay here. We can see the horses over there.'

He shrugged his shoulders, looked at his watch. 'Perhaps it would be wiser.'

'Can you put me some money on Lonely Widow?' she asked. She fumbled with her purse and gave him a pound note.

'I'll have to hurry,' he said.

While he was away she looked at the crowds wandering like ants through the litter of a garbage tip. The sober ones looked as if they'd lost fortunes. Only one in a hundred smiled. The laughter was self-conscious and strained. She heard the shouts as the horses ran, but the noise was faint and failed to compete with the impersonal voice describing over the loud-speakers what might have been a beetle race. She saw a pack of horses drift past a gap between a white and green bus, that was all. She thought she heard Lonely Widow mentioned, then she saw the number hoisted first up the telegraph. She'd won! She experienced a little thrill! She looked out for Nick and thought she'd been mean, but she felt no forgiveness for crowds who

seemed not to care that men lay unburied on eastern battlefields.

Nick waved a sheath of pound notes at her and smiled all over his face.

'Pity it's the last race,' he said.

'Twenty pounds,' she counted. 'We'll drink champagne tonight.'

The journey back, though slow for the first mile, lasted only an hour. At the hotel, a telegram from Will, at the factory, waited for Nick. 'ENGINE TRIAL SUCCESSFUL. ENJOY YOUR HOLIDAY,' it read. He showed it to Cathy. 'The world goes on without us,' he said.

They changed for dinner. She wore a plain close-fitting white dress that bared her shoulders and followed the curve of thigh into hip, of hip to waist, of waist to breasts. They ate at a corner table and drank champagne, cooled in a bucket of ice. After the second bottle Cathy asked:

'Do you want to marry me?'

He shook his head. 'I want you, Cathy, but not as a wife.'

'As your mistress?'

'You know my weakness.'

'At least I know where I stand.'

'There's no need to rush. We've all the time in the world,' he said.

'I wish I had something worth-while to do,' she said. 'If I were a doctor I could lose myself healing people.'

'You could make another man happy.'

'Give me some more champagne.' Long silences punctuated the evening until they decided to dance, then their bodies spoke in a language more persuasive and more powerful than loyalty to the dead.

'This is where we left off,' said Nick as they moved around slowly with the rhythm.

'This is the chariot,' said Cathy.

'Why the chariot?'

'Of desire.'

'Ah,' smiled Nick, 'poetry!'

'Yes,' said Cathy, 'poetry of the mind.'

They drank and danced and talked.

'Should we try to make other people happy?' she asked, watching the champagne bubbles stream to the rim.

'Do unto others—that's what the good book says.'

'Then why am I unhappy?'

'Because you're not making me happy,' he said.

'I made David happy—is that why I'm unhappy?'

'You chose the wrong man.'

'There's neither rhyme nor reason,' she said. 'This room is a match-box and we're all little insects. Antennae and abdomen, proboscis.' She touched his nose and he kissed her hand.

'The first stage of growing up,' he said, 'ends when a man realizes his family, in particular his mother, isn't the centre of the universe. The second stage ends when he realizes that mankind isn't the centre, either.'

'Is there a third?' she asked.

'I'm not that old,' he laughed. She liked the way he smiled! She touched the creases round his mouth with the smooth tip of her index finger.

'I think you're very wise,' she said. 'Where did you buy such wisdom?'

'I sold my youth to the Gods of War,' he said and drank on.

'David sold his life. What did he get in return?' she asked.

'I think he went to Heaven.' When a man dies for an ideal he can only go to Heaven. That's the entrance fee. Funny but so obvious. If you want the next life you have to want it enough to give up this one. The Vikings knew all about Valhalla.'

'Does that apply to women?' she asked.

'Women don't have to fight for an ideal—they have

to love a man sufficiently to bear him a child. That is their passport. They face death in childbirth, for love. Men face it on the battlefield, for an ideal.'

'What about the poor women who meet the wrong man?' she asked.

'Here's my card,' he said. Then he laughed. 'That's where the saying originated—God's gift to women!'

'It's the champagne,' she said, 'that's what makes me happy. Champagne tells me what I want and stops my ears to the quiet voices.' She held his hand.

'Let's dance,' she whispered.

'I want you,' he said. She could feel the champagne loosening the straps of self-restraint, making her limbs move sensuously to the rhythm of the music. One last stronghold of memory alone held her back.

'Not yet, Nick, my darling, not yet,' she said.

'Pity,' said Nick, 'a great pity.' He took Cathy to her room, smiled wryly, kissed her gently good night.

Cathy undressed as if she had lost her sense of balance. She looked swaying at her long strong limbs, listened to the appeal of her firm breasts and knew she could not condemn them to years of celibacy. Yet something still held her back. She climbed into her bed wanting Nick, but afraid.

She woke up naked under the sheet. David was dead and death was the end. She could do him no harm. Then like Satan's whisper came the thought that she too would one day die, then her fine limbs would rot. She felt fear and anguish in her chest. She sat bolt upright in bed, switched on the light, threw back the bedclothes. She couldn't face the night alone, come what may. All the forces of darkness charged into the battlefield of her mind and captured it while the defence slept drunkenly. She dressed quickly in suit and shoes. Her brassiere, stockings and girdle she wrapped in a towel. Then she thought again, slipped on her bathrobe, picked up her soap and cloth and faced

the silent corridor with the towel over her arm. She hurried now the decision was made. She met no one on her breathless shuffle.

No light shone under Nick's door. She glanced neither to right nor left, but rushed straight in. She saw his eyes catch the light as the door opened and closed.

'Cathy!' he whispered.

'You're not expecting anyone else?' she asked, with trembling bravado; then: 'Come on, then, move over!' Her gown and skirt and coat fell around her ankles. She felt her way. She touched the stubble on his chin.

'Would you like me to shave?' he asked.

'No,' she said. 'No. . . .' Hard limbs bit into soft ones, entwined and sought to become one and for the eternity of a moment achieved a unity.

The moon moved round the silvered sky and peeped in the room. At last Cathy said:

'Darling, I love you.'

'I love you, but I'm afraid it won't last.'

'But you love me now,' she said.

'At this moment I'm your slave. Let me kiss you.'

'You must have known many women.'

'Cathy, my darling, you stand alone on a pedestal.'

'Why won't this last then?' she asked.

Nick paused. He was very tired, very very tired.

'Women always want to talk at this moment. Strike the bargain while the iron's hot, I suppose.'

'What's made you afraid to settle down?'

'I've watched the way Bella's managed Will's life. She's bullied him until he's a big man, so big he has to say his leg is bad to escape doing something he daren't refuse point-blank.'

'All women aren't like Bella.'

'No woman is like that until she's married. Now let's go to sleep. We've stolen our moment's happiness, let's not try to nail it to a cross.'

The following morning, a quarter of an hour before early tea, at the sound of a bell, she dressed in her bathrobe, walked through the door, along the corridor, up the stairs into her own room. She leant against the wall, with her hand still on the knob.

'Good morning,' said Sebastian from the armchair:

Cathy felt the daylight burn suddenly bright as her head jerked back and her eyes opened wide. 'What are you doing here?' she asked.

'Do you want to see your husband again?'

Fear, almost panic widened her eyes.

'David is dead,' she said.

'Then you're not interested, after last night?' asked Sebastian.

'My husband is dead,' she said, trying desperately to collect her thoughts.

'Nobody believes he's alive,' said Sebastian. 'They even decorated your husband posthumously—or hadn't you heard? You'll be invited to the Palace—that should make you very proud.'

'Get out!' she whispered.

'You could see how they were all mourning the sad loss—you saw them on the race-course. Not even you remained faithful to his memory!' Cathy closed her eyes as the truth humiliated her. Sebastian moved close, his eyes only inches from hers.

'Your husband fought for peace and he was betrayed. Did you see the stands full of screaming democrats? They even told you he was dead!' Cathy felt herself dominated by the passion and hate that Sebastian's soft mild voice contrived to carry.

'What do you know about David?' she asked, looking down her cheeks at him.

'He's alive!' he said. 'There's a letter and a photograph on the table.' She looked at the table and moved slowly to it, not knowing whether to expect a trick or

a miracle. She saw the picture of a man, pale, lying on a stretcher, his eyes open and alive.

'He was left for dead. The Chinese are not fighting young men like your husband—they saved his life—but he is still very ill.' Cathy read the letter. It was David's writing. He was a prisoner and being well-treated.

'Only his will-power is keeping him alive,' said Sebastian.

'He's not dead,' said Cathy, at last convinced, and being convinced, horrified with herself.

'We must not destroy his will to live. Without that the doctors are helpless,' said Sebastian.

'What do you mean?' she asked.

'He still thinks you are his faithful wife!'

'I . . . I didn't know he was alive.'

'Do you want to see him again?'

'I shall wait for him.'

'Wait?' sneered Sebastian. 'With brother Nick bringing comfort through the long nights? Waiting is not enough. Will you help him? Or does it suit your purpose to leave him to die on that stretcher?'

'You wouldn't do that!' she said.

'Only you, his wife, can save him,' said Sebastian.

'What can I do?' she asked in despair.

'All I want is yes or no,' said Sebastian. 'Will you help?'

'Yes.'

'Then I will arrange for him to receive medical attention and to be repatriated.'

'What have I to do?' she asked.

Sebastian stood up, his face unsmiling.

'You will give me a photostat of the plans for the B.101,' he said.

Catherine walked to the window. Her legs and her brain were beginning to work again. 'I said I'd do anything, but . . .'

Sebastian picked the photograph from her fingers and walked towards the door. 'So you want him to die?' he said.

'Wait,' she said. 'How do I know you can arrange all this?'

'This photograph came from a world organization.'

'I don't trust you,' she said.

'He's very ill. He's probably calling for you because he believes you love him.'

'I don't trust you.'

'If David died tonight—who would be the wiser since he is reported dead already!' He turned the handle of the door.

'You wouldn't, you couldn't. . . .' She looked at his face, now devoid of expression, at the eyes without depth, at the teeth slightly discoloured behind thin lips.

'I'll take the photostat,' she said and closed her eyes.

'Good,' said Sebastian. 'When do you return home?' 'Monday.'

'Monday evening you will report to this address. There you will be given a camera and trained how to use it.' She repeated the address.

'You can keep this photograph,' he said.

Nick sat on a stool with his back against the far wall of the bar. He watched the door through the wall mirror behind the barman and drank his beer slowly. It was midday before he saw Cathy. He turned round and walked to meet her, an intimate smile in his eyes. She too tried to smile but instead, her eyes would only blink and her chin tremble. She squeezed his forearm with her left hand and looked away as if to say 'Not now.' Nick noticed the change, but, taking things as they came, decided not to ask questions.

'Tomato juice?' he asked.

'Can we eat?' she asked.

He smiled a smile which said: 'anything you want, and led her to the dining-room which was empty. They chose a corner table. Cathy sat in silence. Nick changed his mind. He suspected she wanted him to ask questions.

'Is anything wrong?' he asked.

Cathy seemed to collapse.

'Nick,' she said, her voice low and urgent, 'David's alive.'

'Who told you that?' he asked. She showed him the photograph.

'It's from the . . . Red Cross—I received it in a letter this morning.' She gripped his hand. Her fingers were tight bands, unfeeling, clinging to his.

'Thank God!' he said, then he looked at her, a smile wrinkling the skin around his eyes. 'I told you we were a lucky family.'

'Why had it to happen last night!' she said.

'You mean us?' he asked. She nodded. 'Do you regret it?' he asked.

'Only for David's sake,' she said.

'I see,' he said, and put his hand over hers.

'You don't see,' she said. 'You don't see at all. How can I go back to David now? If I had never known you I might have forced myself to be loyal and faithful, but not now. It's easy to do without what you've never had, easy to think the lake is big when you've never seen the sea.'

'Then why are you worried?' he asked.

She shook her head. 'I couldn't keep on hurting someone good and kind.'

'Once you try to please others there's no end to your trouble,' said Nick.

'You don't understand,' she said.

'I do,' he said. 'You still have conscience trouble!'

'I must make amends,' she said.

'You'll be wasted in a convent,' he said.

'I can't help myself, but perhaps I can help David.'

'Am I allowed to ask how?'

'I'll knit him socks,' she said, changing the subject.

'Here's the waiter—or are you too elevated to eat?'

'I'm not hungry,' she said.

When Nick's steak, chips, onions and vegetables had been served, he said:

'By the way, how did the Red Cross know this address?'

'They didn't, but the Works did.'

'They forwarded it?'

'Yes.'

Nick sat on in silence for a while, then said:

'You remember the fat chap we played darts with a few weeks back?'

'We play darts with so many strange characters,' she answered.

'This one was Strefford's partner.'

'After the Blackpool trip?'

'You know who I mean.'

'Yes, a fat man,' she said awkwardly.

'I saw him leave the hotel this morning!' said Nick.

'What's that got to do with David being alive?' she asked.

'I thought you might know.'

'It's a free country,' she said.

The waiter brought a telegram. Nick opened it.

'Blast!' he said.

'Is it confirmation?' she asked.

'No,' said Nick, 'trouble with the 101. Will wants me back.'

'I thought this was a holiday.'

'The 101 comes first, Cathy.'

'Before me?'

'Before either of us, darling.'

The Monday after her return, Cathy told Nick she had letters to write. She watched him drive away after

dropping her at the flat, then she walked along to the bus stop, travelled to the town centre and lost herself in the crowd. The address she sought was a small dusty-windowed shop. She stood hesitant for a moment. Unless she committed treason they would allow David to die slowly and horribly, David whom she had betrayed once already. She turned the handle, walked into the shop, and stifled an urge to run out. A curtain over an inner doorway moved then was whisked aside to reveal Strefford. He was smiling behind his spectacles. She still wanted to run away.

'Good evening,' he said. 'Come inside.' His voice was cold and hostile. His eyes gleamed small out of his pinched-up face and slid over her beauty, but he knew he could never possess her, except, except by force. So he hated her.

She gripped her handbag tightly and walked through the gap between the curtains into a small parlour where an old-fashioned grate choked with burnt paper. She saw a trestle table, a dozen wooden chairs with backs to the wall and a bare electric light bulb hanging by a cobwebbed flex from the ceiling.

Strefford peered through his thick-lensed spectacles and licked his red lips.

'Sit down,' he said. 'Pull your chair up to the table! Can you see? Good.' He opened a small black camera the size of a box of matches, showed her how to empty and replace the film, how to focus and how to photograph. He made her carry out the drill herself, then, apparently satisfied, but with no word of encouragement, told her she could go.

She arrived home just in time to catch the telephone. It was Nick.

'You're very crafty,' he said.

'Why?' she asked, thankful that he couldn't see the alarm on her face.

'I thought you had to write letters.'

'I did.'

'I called back and you were out.' The silence stretched while she tried to find a convincing answer.

'Well?' he asked.

'Don't ask any questions, please!'

'Is this part of your plan of atonement?'

'In a way, yes.'

'I hope your information is reliable, for Will and Bella know nothing.'

'Have you told them?'

'I don't raise people's hopes unless I know what I'm talking about.'

'I must go now,' she said.

'The factory didn't forward any letters to Ascot, either.'

'They must have done,' she said.

'What's the game, Cathy?' he asked.

She rang off. Nick frowned then shrugged his shoulders. He sat on by the 'phone then tried another number. 'Jane?' he asked, then propped his feet on the table. 'We're going out tonight,' he said.

CHAPTER FOUR

CATHY felt the camera hard between her breasts. She glanced through the office door at Nick clearing his desk and packing his brief-case. She ripped the paper from her machine, threw it into the basket and started the letter again. Nick stood in the doorway.

'You look off colour, Cathy. Why don't you tell me about this mysterious letter? Is that what's worrying you?'

She pointed to the pile of correspondence.

'Is your conscience troubling you?' he asked.

'I don't know what it is,' she said, and stood up suddenly. Nick put his hand on her shoulder, but she moved away.

'Are you worried?' he asked.

'It's nothing,' she said. Nick shrugged his shoulders, smiled and said: 'Don't lose too much beauty sleep.' He looked through the office window at a small monoplane revving its engine on the tarmac.

'That's flying me to Farnborough,' he laughed, then added: 'it'll take hours.'

'I wish I could fly away from my troubles,' said Cathy.

But Nick hadn't heard. He was miles away with his dreams. At last he said: 'That'll be the day, when I take the 101 to Farnborough!' She watched him walk out and cross the tarmac.

As soon as the aircraft was roaring away down the runway she opened the left-hand drawer of his desk, took the key and opened the right-hand drawer. There she found the key to the safe. The safe opened easily. She spread the blue prints over the floor, then photographed half of each particular print on one reel of film. She changed the reel, a small metal pellet when rolled up, and photographed the second halves on the second reel. Then she folded the blue prints in their correct order and replaced them in the safe which she locked. The keys she replaced in their various drawers. She glanced through the window and broke out in a cold sweat. Remington stood on the tarmac in front of the building looking up at the window. She saw him walk into the building. Her hand touched the small camera suspended from a necklet and resting in the hollow between her breasts. She heard his footsteps echo along the corridor and stop outside the door. She could feel her eyes grow red with guilt before he ever walked in.

'Hello, Catherine,' he said. She kept her head bent over Nick's pending tray. 'Where's Nick?' he asked.

'He's flown down to a conference at Farnborough,' she said, 'I thought you knew.'

'I did.' He walked up to the wall safe. 'That's my job,' he said, 'knowing where people are and what they're doing.'

Cathy could feel her heart thumping in her throat. Her head felt as if it would burst.

'This is the best safe in the factory,' he continued.

'I'm busy,' she said.

'Do you know where the key is?' he asked.

'Naturally,' she said, certain that her face was a picture of guilt, but trying to keep her voice calm and her hands steady.

'What's locked in here?' asked Remington.

'I think you'd better ask Nick,' she said.

'Don't you know?'

'I do,' she said.

'I saw you open it from the tarmac,' he said.

'Then you saw me check the contents,' she replied, and walked past him into her own office.

'I hope you're not offended,' he said.

'I am,' she answered.

'It's my job.'

'And you love it,' she said, and sat down at her typewriter. 'You'll excuse me,' she said, and rattled away on the keys. She felt his eyes glance over her body before he walked back into the corridor and closed the door. She dared not stop typing much as she wanted to listen to his footsteps growing small down the corridor.

An hour later she caught the local bus outside the factory gates into town. Almost opposite the bus station down a side turning, she walked in the front door of the frowsy little shop. It sold nothing. The

windows were full of faded dirty newspaper clippings about nothing in particular. In the back room Sebastian was waiting for her.

'I can tell you have done it,' he said. She threw the camera on the desk.

'There's only half the photostat there,' she said.

'You were interrupted?' he asked, standing up quickly.

'No, you'll receive the other half when David is safe in this country.'

'You still don't trust me?' He flicked a second photograph of David on to the desk. She examined it. He looked much fitter.

'Where is the other half?' asked Sebastian.

'Safe,' she said. 'You produce David in this country and we'll complete the deal.' She walked smartly out into the street, keeping her dry mouth shut tight.

As soon as she had gone, Strefford walked into the room straight up to Sebastian.

'Are you mad?' he asked. 'Once her husband is in this country we have no hold over her.'

'Naturally.'

'Then why did you agree?'

'I had no alternative,' said Sebastian. 'Her husband has escaped from our Chinese comrades!'

CHAPTER FIVE

DAVID heard the high drone of distant aircraft faintly through the cell walls. He climbed on to the three-plank bed and balanced on one foot so that he could see through the narrow slit of the ventilator.

The noise of the engines grew slowly louder. David

looked down the sun-blached track at the squat buildings crouching under oriental roofs.

Into this deserted, gutterless, dusty track, walked an old man with a scythe curved over his shoulder. Long tousled hair hung down to his shoulders and his clothes were dirty and torn.

A quarter of a mile down the road a single high-barrelled anti-aircraft gun fired a hopeful shell from a pit in a leafless wood alongside a narrow hump-backed bridge. The noise of the aircraft at first grew slowly then developed with frightening rapidity into a nerve-shattering roar.

David saw the old man stop and look slowly round as if aware for the first time that he was alone and, being alone, in danger. The old man's back, as curved and brittle as his scythe, turned slowly and pointed one half-deaf ear to the sky and the other to the ground. David heard the swoosh of the bombs falling like crates from a tall building, but the old man heard nothing. David shouted: 'Look out,' but the old man did not understand. At the last moment, before the bombs exploded in a great billow of black-edged flame, the old man cocked his head backwards on his shoulders so that his eyes could glance sidelong into the clear blue sky. Then the living, white, orange, red, black-edged flame rolled forward and engulfed him.

David felt the heat strike his face but watched on as the black cloud ran away in a million sultry smoke particles. Small fires burnt and crackled on the dry roofs, but David's eyes, as the smoke cleared, were focused on a black gnarled tree stump that stood upright in the middle of the road holding a black scythe.

The roar of the aircraft could no longer be heard. Women ran from their shelters and fetched jugs and jars and buckets and threw thimblefuls of water on to the angry flames. Still the charred figure of the old

man stood upright, unnoticed except by David from the prison cell.

An hour later, a staff car camouflaged yellow and brown whipped up a fine cloud of dust, honked imperiously at the charred stump, then, after an angry swerve, halted with the bonnet inches from the black scythe. A Staff Captain shouted from his window at the dead old man. His ranting reached a climax followed by silence. The Captain jumped out of the car, looked at four impassive onlookers, then saw through the blinding self-righteousness of his anger that he had been shouting at charred ears. The shock quietened him for a moment. He looked at the corpse, then the car, then the onlookers. He pointed to the corpse and told the onlookers to remove it, but they moved closer together and away from the dead man. The officer drew out his pistol. A voice from inside the car recalled him.

'Let us not multiply our difficulties,' it said.

'Yes, Major,' said the Captain, and holstered his gun.

The car backed away and the officers climbed out and walked past the corpse close to the burnt and smouldering wall. David saw them walk up to the prison and heard them outside the door. He climbed down from the window, sat on the edge of his narrow bed and stared at the whitewashed mud crumbling and flaking two feet from his face. He heard booted feet march down the corridor and halt outside, heard the bolts dragged back, and still kept staring at the wall, even when the hinges creaked open.

'Attention!' shouted the guard. David rose slowly to his feet and half turned. The guard climbed on to the bed and slid his hand along a ledge high up. He unfolded a piece of brown, dusty paper and held out a small metal bar hanging from a piece of string and said:

'You'll not be needing this compass. Escape is impossible!' and looked to the Major for praise. David

looked down at his captor's eyes. The guard stared at the button at David's neck, refusing to look upwards.

'Come!' said the slant-eyed, smooth-skinned guard. David looked at him. Seventeen years of age, perhaps, with a loaded gun and enough experience and learning to pull the trigger.

David followed the guard into a small office with bare brick walls. The Major, Sen Lutang, sat at a trestle table and motioned David to sit down on a form, facing him.

'If this conversation goes well,' said Sen Lutang in sing-song English, 'I will take you on the first leg of your journey home—a visit to the Colonel.' David nodded his head and thought not of home, but of reaching home and of the answers that were the key to the locked doors.

'What is the function of capitalist political parties?'

'To give the appearance of freedom and the reality of exploitation.'

'Good. What is the capitalist function of sex?'

'To provide workers for the factories and to distract the attention of the workers from their bondage.'

'Good. What is the function of football pools?'

'To distract the attention of the workers from their bondage.'

'And religion?'

'The same.'

'You're a good pupil. You are ready to see the Colonel.'

David was led to the car and pushed into the rear seat alongside the Major. The car started at a touch. Heat waves shimmered above the bonnet. Through the haze reared the black stump that had been a beggar, a black stump that remained etched in white when David closed his eyes even after the car had left the village far behind.

'Where are we going?' he asked, his voice covered by the noise from the engine so that only the Major could hear his words.

'I am keeping my promise,' said the Major. David licked his lips. Hand in hand with the prospect of freedom walked danger. He had been locked a long time in a small cell. He wasn't quite certain what to do with all this space.

'Do you no longer trust me?' asked the Major.

'I trust you.'

'Every day we have talked,' said the Major.

'Talk is easy,' said David.

'Now we must act.'

'But the risk?' said David, 'the risk for you.'

'How else can a man prove his beliefs?' asked the Major.

'Then you trust me?' asked David.

'The risk is well conceived. I trust you.'

The dull rumble of artillery fire drifted like echoes of distant thunder over the blue mountain ridges down the steep valleys. The road cut along through peaceful woods and cut across mountain streams.

'You are a good man,' said the Major.

'God give me strength to live up to that description,' said David.

'We shall not meet again,' said the Major. 'All that there is to say we have said in our daily talks. All that remains is to work independently towards our common ideal.'

'And trust that the other is doing the same,' said David.

'Is still alive,' said Major Lutang and looked David in the eye. The car climbed upwards in bottom gear. The guns were nearer. Village children searched among heaps of rubble for food, for parents.

'The front line is only two miles away. When we

reach the top of this hill, we shall start moving away from the fighting,' said the Major.

The sun dipped below the mountain range and cold shadows darkened the valley. David opened the car door, rolled out and down the hillside. The Captain felt a draught on his neck and turned round, shouting to make himself heard above the noise of the engine.

'He's escaped.'

'Of course,' said the Major.

'Stop the car!'

'Drive on!' said the Major.

'But. . . .'

The Major smiled. 'Now you may signal the instructions to our comrades in England. They must meet our friend David—and use him,' he said.

'Are the enemy such fools?' asked the Captain.

'Oh, they'll pin a medal on his chest, but when the shouting has died away, he'll do what we want.'

'Even if his wife opens her arms?' asked the Captain.

Major Lutang shook his head.

'He doesn't know about his wife. No letters from home ever reached him. He believes nothing has changed.'

'Does he really believe he escaped?'

'Of course!' said the Major.

The Captain shook his head sadly, then laughed.

The Major said: 'We have planted the truth in his mind. He may not believe it now—but when he looks around him in his own country, he will see it is the truth.'

CHAPTER SIX

NICK paced restlessly backwards and forwards over the grey carpet in Cathy's lounge. 'What's on your mind?' he asked. 'You've been as friendly as a stoat since the Ascot trip.' Cathy raised a hand helplessly.

'I don't know,' she said.

'Are you having second thoughts about David?'

'I don't think I'm capable of loving anybody,' she said. He leant towards her, his right eyebrow raised.

'Depends what you mean by love,' he said and rested his hand lightly on hers. She brushed it away.

'Sex!' she said. 'That's all we're good for!'

'Only the lucky ones!'

'That's not funny.'

'You need a drink,' he said and poured out two large gin and lemons. Cathy drank hers quickly in an effort to escape the depression leaning over her shoulder.

'It might help if you told me,' he said, 'about the letter.'

'I don't know where to start. It's as involved as a modern painting.' She poured out another gin.

'Mixing values is worse than mixing liquor,' said Nick.

'That's right,' she said. 'You tell me what to do, then someone will be satisfied.'

'You're trying to please too many people,' he said.

'You worry about Dave, about me, about Bella and Will.'

'Is that wrong?' she asked.

'You can't make them all happy. You can bend over backwards, but unless they want to, you'll not make them happy.'

'So I don't bend over backwards,' she said.

'There's only one person you stand a chance, a fifty per cent. chance of making happy. . . .'

'That's you,' she said.

'No, yourself. Don't ask so many questions, just do what you want.'

She seemed to agree.

'I'm only human,' she said, 'more human than most.'

'You're beautiful and wonderful and I wouldn't climb over you to kiss any woman in the world,' he said.

'That's half the trouble,' she said.

'I know,' he said, 'I'm coarse.'

'Nothing matters but the appetite,' she said. 'Eat, drink, sleep.'

'I once believed in the abstracts,' said Nick. 'I cherished an ideal of love. Oh, it was beautiful, until I realized that every woman I met fell below the picture in my mind. Then I grew up. I started loving women, women who sweated and smelled.' She frowned at her glass of gin. 'I know, I'm coarse,' said Nick, 'but so is life.'

'Why do I feel guilty doing what comes naturally?' she asked.

Nick filled up the glasses again.

'Puritan upbringing,' he said. 'You either have it in this life or have it in the next. You believe all the conventions until you learn how phoney they are. Then you're too old, so you start making the headlines with Boy Scouts.'

'What about loyalty and true love?' asked Cathy.

'Love is true only as long as the physical attraction lasts,' said Nick, 'and while we're on the subject—when you tire of me, don't beat about the bush. Just tell me I'm a clapped out dead-beat. I'll know what you mean.'

'Will you return the compliment?' she asked.

'I'll give you three weeks,' he said, and lifted her chin in his hand. He saw in her eyes that at least her body was on his side. He kissed her on the lips. She sighed and her body merged into his with soft-armed welcome. They lay on the couch until the bell rang. Nick straightened his tie, smoothed his hair.

'I'll go,' she said. She made running repairs on the way to the door.

'Hello, Will!' she said, her voice loud with warning. 'Come in! This is a surprise!' Will sniffed the air for a moment, then hopped inside.

'Have I disturbed you?' he asked.

'No,' she said, uncertainly.

'I'll not stay long,' he said, hopping on his crutches into the lounge.

'Hello, Will,' said Nick, as large as life.

'Sit down while I make some tea,' said Cathy.

'No,' he said, 'no, Cathy. I'd like to say what I have to say and get it over with.'

'What is it, Will?'

'I had to come,' he said.

'What's the trouble?' asked Nick. A hard note had crept into his voice.

'A young fellow from the Works called on me last night and told me that Cathy had been unfaithful to David.'

'Do you believe that?' asked Nick.

'Cathy,' said Will. 'It's not my job to pass judgement. I don't want to set myself up on high.'

'Has Bella heard the same story?' asked Cathy.

'She knows nothing.' Cathy walked slowly to the window.

'She'd love it, wouldn't she?' asked Cathy.

'You have been seeing a lot of each other,' said Will. She detected the change in his voice. He looked slowly round the room, saw the two glasses half empty on the floor by the settee.

'Cathy,' he said, seriously and with his voice lowered. 'Is it true?'

'What the hell does it matter if it is true!' said Nick. 'She's young and clean. Do you expect her to moulder away for the rest of her life?'

Will climbed to his feet and stared out of the window, into the blue sky.

'I came to tell you that David is alive. He escaped from a prison camp and is safe behind our own lines.'

'Escaped!' she said and sat down weakly on the settee.

Will watched the rubber caps on his crutches swing in rowers' arcs towards the door. 'It's only because I love you and Nick and Dave that I mention this. I've absolutely no right to interfere in your lives, but David trusts you. Think twice before you disillusion him.'

'Don't bother about me,' said Nick, 'just consider little golden boy!'

'I shan't talk about this,' Will said, 'no one else need ever know.'

'Who told you?' asked Nick.

'Remington,' said Will. 'He also said that a great responsibility would rest on everyone to see that David didn't go off the rails.'

Then they were alone in the room. They heard Will's car start in the drive below. A moment later Nick, unabashed, stuck his head round in front of hers.

'Did you see his face when he saw the glasses?' he asked. She nodded. She felt small and horrible.

'So what,' said Nick and shrugged his shoulders, 'he had to find out some time.'

'He knows now,' she said.

'Look,' said Nick. 'Do you want me to tell Dave—is that what you're afraid of—would that please your conventional mind?'

'You tell him!' she said, then she laughed to the verge of hysterics. 'Will said he's escaped from a prison camp!'

The smile left Nick's face and a little of the confidence deserted his voice.

'I wish he'd make his bloody mind up,' he said. 'Still, thank God he's alive.' He walked up to Cathy and held her by the shoulders. 'Which of us is it going to be?' he asked. She looked away from his face, her lips tight and her forehead creased with indecision. He kissed her and met neither opposition nor co-operation.

'I'll make the decision for you, this time,' he said. He kissed her again. 'Can you say no to me now?' he asked.

'I don't know,' she said.

Cathy sat alone and watched the dark night outside the window. Occasionally she moved her head gently from side to side as if some grave issue tormented her thoughts. She might have stayed in that uneasy equilibrium long into the night had not the door-bell shrilled through the silence.

She jerked upright in the chair, blinked her eyes then moved unevenly to the front door.

'Good evening,' said Sebastian with his foot on the step, 'may I come in?' She stood to one side for him to pass. He stood in the lounge ignoring his surroundings, his eyes fixed on Cathy.

'I have good news for you,' he said. 'Your husband is free.'

'I know,' said Cathy, unmoved.

'Then you will give me the rest of my film?'

'I will.'

'Now.'

'It's still at the factory.'

'Then you'll give it to Strefford tomorrow.'

'I'll deliver it as soon as it's humanly possible,' she said, her nerves ragged at the edges.

'Have you seen the evening paper?'

'No.'

He spread one on the table. David's photograph looked out from the front page.

'He looks very grim,' she said slowly as if her thoughts were troubled.

'He should be very happy. They've given him another medal!' Sebastian laughed. She saw insanity look out of his eyes. 'For escaping!' he added, and burst out into high-pitched, eye-watering hysterics.

When they subsided he added softly:

'We have fooled the authorities.' He rubbed his thumb against the fore-finger of his left hand as if the texture of a pound note was the sweetest thing on earth. Then he added: 'They must never know we organized his escape.'

Cathy raised the tips of her fingers slowly to her half open mouth. She realized that Sebastian had increased his hold over her. She asked: 'What will happen if the authorities find out?'

'I am expendable,' he said, 'but you and your husband are too valuable to lose.' Cathy frowned.

'We are valuable?' she asked.

'You are important because of your positions and because we control you,' said Sebastian. Cathy sat down. The flesh on her arm felt cold to her touch. 'I like controlling people,' he said. 'They are like atoms. I take a man or a woman, put a new idea in his head and I control him.'

'I don't know what you're talking about. You're mad,' she said.

'You have guilty secrets,' he said. 'Your husband also has secrets about which not even you will ever know. So I can control him as well.'

'I don't believe you!'

'He has been away a long time—away from all

women—it's a good job he doesn't know that you have been unfaithful!

'You swine!'

'I want that film by tomorrow.'

'What do you want from David?'

c. He ignored her question.

'We have only our knowledge and our implacable determination to gain power,' he said. Cathy felt very cold and frightened.

'What do you want from David?' she asked again.

'His brother designed the 101. His brother flies the 101. He has every cause to hate his brother. He also hates capitalism. It is a situation we usually contrive to exploit. You see, David is a communist.'

She felt sick and tired.

Sebastian walked quickly away, almost ran to the nearest telephone box and dialled a local number. 'Jenny?' he said. 'Have you the evening paper? Good. Will you look on the front page? Good. Can you see the photograph of a young man? Good. Do you like the look of him? Very good.' He rang off and walked at a normal pace to the bus stop.

CHAPTER SEVEN

WILL stared through the window at a storm cloud shaped like a towering bear and watched it drift across the English sky surrounded by blue eternity and bright sunshine. He heard the door close.

'Look at the time,' said Bella, her voice strong again, 'the car will be here directly.'

'Aye,' said Will.

'Don't keep saying "Aye." Put your pipe down and your coat on.

'I'm not going,' Will said. Bella listened to angry thoughts in the silence that followed.

'Well!' she said, then: 'What will people think?'

'I'm not going!' Will repeated.

'Now, Will, don't say that—David'll want to see you more than either the Mayor or the Corporation.'

'Did anyone ask me if we wanted a civic reception?'

'So that's it!' she said. 'The Mayor didn't ask you!'

'We'll soon have enough to worry about without imagining things,' said Will. Bella stared at Will.

'You've heard something about David!' she said.

'That's the car outside,' said Will.

'I know very well it's the car outside. You answer my question—has David telephoned?'

'No, he hasn't.'

'Nor written?'

'You've read his letters.'

'What are you keeping back?'

'It's nothing, Bella, just a feeling.'

The bell on the front door rang hard and clear. Bella walked out, her new black hat perched squarely on the top of her head precisely ten degrees in advance of fashion. Will heard the door open and looked round as Catherine stood in the doorway, dark and beautiful, her eyes large, round and deep brown, her hair black and glistening, her lips red and beautifully curved, wide enough for generosity, and more.

'There's a crowd waiting outside the station already,' she said.

'Aye,' said Will, and thought it's the way she's built. It's no use blaming water for running downhill or a cuckoo for laying eggs in another bird's nest.

'You don't sound very enthusiastic,' said Catherine.

'No,' said Will, wondering just how much she would tell David.

'He's earned it, hasn't he?' she asked. Will looked at her and asked:

'Has he earned everything that's waiting for him?'

'What do you mean?' Bella asked.

'It's not a crowd he'll be looking for,' said Will.

'What are you driving at?' Bella asked. Will laughed.

'Nothing,' he said, and drew it out long. 'Nothing at all.' Will broke off the conversation as Nick walked in.

'Mother certainly can choose a hat,' said Nick and walked close to Catherine. Will watched them, then said:

'You're not both going to meet David?'

'We're all going together. The more the merrier,' said Catherine.

'The merrier or the safer?' asked Will.

'Come on, Will,' said Nick, 'we want to be on time today.'

'I'm not going—my leg's bad,' said Will.

'You're a worse liar than I am,' said Nick.

Catherine broke forward and, with sincerity, said: 'Nick's only joking. Let me help you with your crutches.'

'I'm not the one who needs your help,' said Will.

'Don't you think I'd rather wait here?' she asked.

'Why don't you then?' asked Will.

'Because he's still my husband.'

'Aye . . . ' said Will.

Catherine turned abruptly and walked sharply to the door. Bella turned and said:

'He's sulking because the Mayor didn't consult him about the civic reception.'

'Come, for David's sake,' said Nick.

'One of us ought to stay here,' said Will, 'and don't kid yourself that you're fooling me with this "for David's sake".'

'I can hear the train down the valley,' called Bella from the front door.

Nick waited until Bella and Cathy had gone out, then sat down facing Will. He looked at the strong fingers of his hard well-kept hands.

'You had a caller this morning?'

'Aye,' said Will.

'Remington?' asked Nick. Will nodded.

'So did I,' said Nick.

'What did he ask you?' said Will.

'He wanted to know if David had ever been bolshy,' said Nick.

'What did you say?' asked Will.

'You can trust me not to tell the truth,' said Nick.

'Go on,' said Will.

'I said he was a solid reactionary,' said Nick.

Will didn't smile at Nick's lightheartedness.

'What's wrong?' asked Nick.

'You steal his wife while he's away fighting and ask what's wrong!' Nick stood up.

'Get your facts straight, Will,' he said.

'Do you deny it?'

'I wanted Cathy before David ever came on the scene, but like a fool, I was waiting for her to grow up!'

'That doesn't sound like you,' said Will.

Nick said: 'We all thought David was dead.'

'You didn't wait long,' said Will.

'He always was your favourite,' Nick said.

'Is that why you stole his wife?'

'We thought she was his widow!'

Will shifted his weight angrily from one buttock to the other. 'You'll be late. Go on, get out.'

'Does he know about Cathy and me?' asked Nick.

'You should've thought of that before.'

'It wasn't a matter of thinking,' said Nick slowly, 'it just happened.'

'With you nothing just happens. Nor is she any better. You make a fine pair! I only pray that David is strong enough to bear the shock.'

'Lot of help you are,' said Nick and walked out.

Will listened to the car start and the three and a half litre engine snort angrily under Nick's foot as it roared away down the road. Will rocked in his chair then stretched out his hand to the telephone, dialled a number and waited. 'Is that the Junction?' he asked. 'Has the London train been through? Did anyone get off? Two men? One of them had a limp? No, that's all. Thank you.' Will slapped down the receiver, picked up his crutches and hopped over to the bow-fronted side-board bleached by someone with more taste than Sheraton. He opened the cellarette, pulled out a bottle of Scotch with a virgin head and flanked it with three large, stemmed glasses that rang like mellow bells. Then he sat down to wait and smiled at the thought of Bella and Catherine and the Mayor and half the town waiting at the main station, for nothing.

As Nick changed gear unobtrusively, one thought held his mind: who would Cathy choose? Catherine sat half-turned towards him. She scarcely took her eyes from his face. While the slight smile on her lips appeared to appreciate his good driving, her thoughts were revolving around the return of David. No one would tell him. No one ever did. She wanted to make an excuse, stop the car, run away and hide. Then she told herself that they were living in the twentieth century, but it gave her no comfort. She knew that sooner or later she would have to break the news to him herself. Once she might have preferred deception. But Nick had given her confidence in her emotions. He had forced a choice upon her, a choice between what she felt and

what she thought. Feeling had won. But she feared the effect it would have on David.

Bella sat on the rear seat leaning slightly forward so that passers-by could see her face and her formidable hat.

The car moved at fifteen miles an hour where thirty was the limit. Nick sensed that behind the front of Cathy's acting, fear struggled with excitement. He stopped for the policeman on point duty in the town centre. Bella noticed that passers-by glanced twice at the car. She waved to an acquaintance, smiled sweetly at the policeman, taking his signal to proceed as a personal tribute. The policeman thought of his wife at home, scrubbing, patching, mending, waiting while he administered the law which protected fine ladies in swank cars. Then he thought of his football pools. He mustn't forget the post when the new season started. Seventy-five thousand pounds. One, two, three, four, over seven thousand weeks' salary for putting eight little noughts in the right squares!

Nick raised his hand to the policeman and drove on towards the station, past the *Evening Post* offices, past Woolworths, past Marks and Spencers, and parked smoothly by the Vic and Station Hotel.

'Look at the crowd!' said Bella.

'I'm a little nervous,' said Cathy, then glanced at Bella and added: 'it's the excitement of welcoming home a hero.'

'Especially when you're wearing the right clothes for the occasion,' said Nick. He opened the door and helped out Cathy and Bella. On the pavement a reporter from the *Post* said:

'Lo, Nick, come to meet your brother?' Nick shook hands and introduced the newcomer.

'This is Wally Whatmough from the *Post*. We went to school together,' said Nick and introduced him to Cathy and Bella.

• Whatmough raised his hat. 'Can we take a photograph?'

'The ladies will love it,' said Nick and smiled.

'It won't take a second,' said Whatmough.

'Oh Nick!' said Bella, 'I look such a sight.'

'You look terrible,' said Nick.

'Do I?' said Bella, her bold front suddenly crumpling and revealing a very unsure old lady.

'No, darling,' said Nick, feeling mean, 'you look fine—I was pulling your leg.'

'I remember you as a pupil at the Park School,' said Whatmough to Cathy.

'She's David's wife,' said Bella, 'and I'm his mother.' Cathy avoided Nick's eyes and watched Whatmough's pencil skid over his pad. A flash-bulb splashed blinding light over the group. Eyes blinked. Cathy laughed uncertainly.

'The Mayor's on the platform,' said Whatmough.

As they walked down the crowded slope to the station approach Nick took hold of Cathy's arm and said:

'You wouldn't let this go to your head, would you?'

'Is that all you're worrying about?' asked Cathy.

'Is that the train coming in?' asked Bella. Trains always excited Bella. There was romance in the shining expresses, a thrill in the power of the engine hauling the luxury coaches from Edinburgh to London, full of passengers, men, dark and fair, and women.

'No more platform tickets,' said the collector. Nick tried to put a half-crown in the man's hand. 'I don't want your money either.'

'I'm his mother!' said Bella with a fair load of dignity.

'Whose?'

'David Duerden's.'

'Go on in, then,' laughed the ticket collector.

'And this is his wife,' added Bella.

'No wonder they couldn't hold him! I suppose you're his father.'

Nick smiled, but his eyes were flecked with anger.

'Charley's Aunt,' said Nick. The collector looked closer at Nick.

'You're the test pilot,' he said. 'Go on in,' he said, then as if in explanation: 'Everybody's his relation. His grandfather must have had a hell of a life.' Nick shook his head.

'I'll wait in the car,' he called and turned away. He didn't know why he'd turned away, except that it was not because he was afraid of facing David. It had something to do with fair play. He laughed harshly.

Cathy's nerve broke and she tried to follow Nick, but Bella grabbed her by the arm and bored her way to the platform. She broke through the cordon and was greeted by the Mayor just as the train halted. Passengers jack-in-the-boxed out of carriage doors. Windows opened and red, greasy faces stared at the civic dignitaries.

Bella grabbed the Mayor by the arm. 'Can you see him?'

'No, not yet.'

Cathy tried to remember the David she had known, caught him in her memory and for a moment wondered. Bella thought of Will staying at home.

Doors were slamming along the length of the train and the crowd, knee deep in suitcases, was drifting along the platform. A whistle blew.

'Where is he?' asked Bella, glancing through a thin smile at the Mayor, then standing on tiptoe and searching the crowd again.

A cannon-ball of smoke and steam burst from the engine funnel, shot into the blue sky, was followed by another and another, each gaining momentum. The carriages rolled slowly and silently as if moved by will-power.

'Perhaps he's missed the train,' said the Mayor, unable to imagine someone avoiding the Mayor deliberately.

'What are we going to do?' asked Bella.

'Go home,' said Cathy, 'quickly.'

'You must come home with us, Mr. Mayor,' said Bella.

'That would be a pleasure,' he replied, grasping the chance to save his face.

The crowd began to drift away, finding excuses, laughing. Cathy, for the first time, felt a fibre of worry. Bella held her chin a shade higher and her elbows a little more firmly into her sides. The Mayor smiled more broadly than ever, but spoke sharply to his attendant.

Bella drove with the Mayor. Cathy slipped unobtrusively into Nick's car.

'He wasn't there,' she said.

'So I gathered.' They drove on in silence.

'What are we going to tell him?' she asked.

'Tell him what you like,' said Nick.

'You're a swine,' she said.

'Will thinks we make a good pair.'

'Perhaps Will will tell David.'

'No,' said Nick. 'He'll not do that. He'll leave it to us and pray that we make the right decision.'

'What am I going to do?' she asked.

'Tell him you prefer being my mistress to being his wife.'

'Your mistress?' asked Cathy, at last seeing plainly the choice.

'Test pilots ought never to marry,' said Nick.

'Give up flying,' she said and held his arm.

'You'll be asking me to give up breathing next,' he said.

The door-bell jangled among Will's thoughts. He felt all the strength drain from his good leg.

'The key's under the mat,' he called out, his mouth impossibly dry and his eyes hot-rimmed. He saw the door opened by David. It was David. Only David had eyes like that, blue and frank and honest. It was only the eyes that told him that the lean, hard man was not a tough-looking stranger. David stared at his father. After two years of killing emotion to maintain sanity he no longer felt anything without authority from his brain. He no longer felt. He only thought and acted. He felt nothing beyond a detached acceptance that this was his own father whom he had not seen for two years and whom he had also loved. He had it on the record that he still loved this man—his father, but he didn't feel it.

Will was a little frightened. David looked stern and grim and without emotion.

'Tell me,' said David, 'why did no one write?'

'Didn't you receive our letters!'

'Did you write?'

'Of course, David.'

'Perhaps you can tell me where my wife is?'

'She's at the station.' Will looked at David. They stood close to each other, their faces a foot apart, their eyes steady, then David called out: 'Butch! Come on in and meet the old man.' Butch Mathers, equally as tough, looking a shade older, with short-cropped hair, limped in. His face crinkled with a smile as he held out a wide-open hand and said: 'We didn't expect him back so soon, did we?'

Will cleared his throat and blinked from one to the other. He hopped over to the sideboard, held up the bottle with the label flashing.

'Scotch!' exclaimed Butch and grinned.

'Water?' asked Will.

'I'll take mine straight,' said Butch, wiping his mouth and chin with his huge hand.

'Water for me,' said David, 'to the top.' Will passed round the glasses.

'Here's to you both,' he said, 'welcome home.'

They drank and 'ha-ed' appreciation of the fine liquor, then a silence developed as an unspoken thought occupied all three minds. At last Will said: 'They'll soon be back from the station.'

'Sure,' said Butch, and as if the question had only just occurred to him: 'Where is everybody, especially Catherine?'

'They're waiting with the Mayor . . .'

'She didn't think I'd walk into that?' asked David.

'She thought you'd earned it,' said Will. Butch laughed:

'That's the way women are. They like their menfolk to have fine feathers. Nature, I suppose.'

'But you stayed at home,' said David.

'I don't like fine feathers,' said Will.

'Neither do I,' said Butch, chipping hard at the sharp edge of the talk, 'I go for the flesh underneath.'

'Let's have another Scotch,' said David.

'Take it easy, Dave,' said Butch, 'we don't want to be high when Catherine walks in.'

'Am I 'drinking alone?' asked David and poured whisky into his glass like petrol out of a jerry can.

'No more for me just now,' said Will.

'Me too neither,' said Butch.

'So I'm on my own,' said David. Will frowned and pushed with the rubber tip at the end of his crutch a spent match along the tiled fire surround.

'Have I said something wrong, David?' he asked in a small voice.

'No,' David said, 'I've waited so long, another half-hour's neither here nor there.'

'He's been building up,' said Butch.

'Let's all have a drink—they'll be home soon,' said Will.

'One more won't flatten us,' said Butch. Will kept talking quickly, without selection, afraid of silence.

'Is this the first time you two have met since you were wounded together?' he asked.

'I met him in London,' said Butch.

'Did you fly home?' asked Will, almost on his knees to break through to the old David.

'American aircraft most of the way,' said Dave.

'How did they treat you?'

'The Yanks?'

'The Chinese.'

'By their own standards, so-so.'

'And by ours?'

'Their standards don't reach higher than a snake's belly—but that was just my bad luck,' said David.

'Did you meet much propaganda?'

Dave, who had been looking through the window, turned slowly and said quietly:

'Look, Dad, I've had enough questioning.'

'But you didn't swallow it?'

'Swallow what?'

'The propaganda.'

'Suppose I bloody had!'

'Now, Dave, your Dad means no harm—he's worried about you. You're lucky to have someone who cares that much.'

Dave closed his eyes. He looked drawn and white, as if the whisky had nipped the tops off a string of ulcers.

'I'm sorry, Will,' he said. 'Butch is right.'

'Butch is also thirsty. Kind of grows on you, this Scotch. We've been knocking it back solid all the way from Euston, except for a half-hour in the taxi.'

'They're back,' said Dave from the window, then: 'Whose is the car?'

'Nick's,' said Will.

The front door rattled open and Bella entered. She

stood silently, her mouth open, her eyes wide. Then she raised her arm and said: 'David,' and ran towards him wide-armed.

'I'm so glad to see you I'd forgive you anything,' she said and hugged his head as if he were a small boy again. David patted her shoulder. Her emotion ebbed away. She turned to her husband. 'But you, Will Duerden, you let me go and make a fool of myself in front of the Mayor. "Your son is coming?" his Worship asked. "Yes your Worship," I said.' Then her eyes blazed. 'You knew all along . . .!' and her teeth clenched.

'Nay, Bella,' said Will, 'I didn't know he was coming straight home.'

'I suppose you stayed behind to look at the Test Match!'

'He didn't know,' said Dave.

Bella sighed: 'I've never seen such a crowd—they might've been waiting for the Duke. I didn't know there were so many pretty girls in town.'

'I guess they've all gone home now?' Butch drawled.

'Butch Mathers!' said Bella.

'We travelled from London together,' said David. 'I asked him home.'

A car horn shattered the neighbourhood in three keys. Bella walked to the window, opened it and shouted: 'Come on in, Catherine, he's here!'

David turned his back to the room and stared into the black empty fireplace. He felt weak and unsure. For the first time emotion broke through his guard. He thought of Cathy. He thought of dew on grass in the early morning. He thought of the sun setting in a purple haze.

Butch looked quickly round at Bella and said:

'I think I'd like to meet the Mayor and ask him why I never got a civic reception.' Bella's hand shot up to her mouth.

'Good Lord!' she said, 'he's still outside.'

'I'd like a word with Joe Burke too,' said Will.

'I must be the complete master of drawing-room subtleties,' Butch said.

'Come on, Bella,' said Will, 'let's introduce Butch to the Mayor.' Bella, afraid of missing something, nevertheless gave in to the importance of impressing a guest. She smiled sweetly at Butch, ignored Will and led the way out.

David turned slowly and saw, not Catherine, but Nick, ~~unsmiling~~.

'You look as if you'd just come back from a prison camp,' said Nick.

'Where's Catherine?' asked David.

'She's in the car, where I left her.'

'In the car. . . .?'

'I want to talk to you.'

'That can wait.'

'There's nothing left between you and Catherine except what you've imagined,' said Nick. David remained as still as a dead tree on a calm day. 'I'm being cruel to be kind,' said Nick.

'Is Catherine coming inside?' asked David.

'This is the best way, David,' Nick said and looked at the whisky. 'Will you have one with me?' he asked.

'No,' said David and shook his head slowly. A small line curled at the corner of his mouth. Nick saw it. He'd seen it before when they'd fought together as kids.

David asked: 'Why doesn't she tell me herself?'

Nick looked at his glass, shrugged his shoulders and said:

'Catherine's my mistress.'

'You're a liar, Nick,' said David, his voice unemotional, as if he'd said two times two makes four. 'You always have been, when it suited your purpose. Now finish your drink and send in Catherine.' The smile faded

from Nick's face, not through fear or shock, but because he didn't waste energy striving for impossible effects. A smile was meant to soften the opposition, to charm a sucker or a fool. David was neither.

'You don't believe me?' said Nick, quietly, relaxed.

'No.'

'You're making it difficult for everyone.'

'Send her in.' They both turned as the front door opened. Catherine walked in.

'The windows are wide open and your voices carry,' she said with only the faintest tremble in her voice.

'He doesn't believe me,' said Nick.

'Leave us alone, Nick,' said David.

'I think I'll stay.'

'Listen, Nick,' said David, his tone a shade lower, 'you've had your innings. Now it's my turn.'

'Wait in the car please,' said Catherine to Nick, her hand resting on his arm, her finger tips and her eyes passing a message that she didn't want David to hear. Nick smiled at the touch. He understood. He didn't believe in hitting a man while he was down. Men like David weren't always on their backs. He shrugged his shoulders. Catherine watched him leave then turned slowly. David caught the line of her breasts.

'You've changed, David,' she said, her eyes wide so that he would know that she thought the change was for the better.

'Is memory such a poor thing?' he asked.

'I remembered you as you were,' she said, 'but . . .' She saw him walk up. Felt him kiss her mouth, almost brutally. A fierce wind from the hot wastes of suffering threatened the nice calculations in her mind. Her arms jack-knifed at the elbows and her fists clenched in mid-air, then locked round his neck.

'Changing your mind?' he asked. She searched his face, but saw no trace of love or passion. Fear curled

the edges of the thrill coursing through her body. The positions are changing, she thought.

'I don't know,' she said, remembering the kind, trusting, eager-to-please David of two years ago.

'Nick said you loved him.' Catherine turned away.

'I love both of you . . .' she said.

'Did Nick make the advances?'

'He was kind when we believed you were killed.'

'He gave you the sympathy you didn't need?'

'David!'

'He played up to your pretence at sorrow!'

'No!' she cried.

He wondered why he was saying these things, why he was trying to hurt and make writhe the body he wanted to caress and kiss.

'You fancied yourself as the widow, pale and lonely and dressed in black!' he said.

'It's not true!'

'You always were the actress playing to the gallery.'

'No, no!'

'How else did it happen? Could a true love, a true sorrow be so short-lived?'

'I didn't know you were alive!'

'You let me dream through long weeks and months.'

He walked to the window. 'When a man's far from his loved ones he daren't allow for change. His memories are the one haven in a sea of despair. His dreams are as vulnerable as a paper ship.'

'I thought of you, David.'

'While you lay in his arms?'

'Won't you try to understand, give me a chance to explain?'

'I've been listening to explanations for a whole year. I've had enough.'

'Your look frightens me,' said Cathy.

'You'll be happy with Nick, two parasites together!'

'Parasites!'

'Your voices travel half-way down the road,' said Nick from the french window. He walked up to Catherine and made to put his arm round her. She twisted away.

'Leave me alone, both of you.'

Nick walked as if to follow.

'I'll come with you,' he said.

'No!' She snatched her arm from his touch. 'I don't want either of you,' and ran out. Nick swung on David.

'What have you said to her?'

'Use your imagination—like I've had to.'

Nick helped himself to a large whisky. He walked towards David. He didn't want to strike him. 'You've had a rough time,' he said, 'but that's no reason for taking it out of a woman.'

'You're always the gentleman!' said David.

'I'm your brother. We were brought up together, same parents and all that.'

'We know each other quite well!'

'Of course we do! Listen, Dave. This hero stuff won't last five minutes. The only reason they're making this fuss is to prove they haven't forgotten you—because they did forget you.'

'Are you afraid it might turn Cathy's head?' asked David.

'This hero stuff won't help Catherine's bank balance,' said Nick.

'I've heard that somewhere before.'

'Of course you have because it's the truth. Hero-worship will blind a girl for five minutes, but it won't buy her nylons to wear and a car to drive. You can't hope to keep Catherine happy without money . . . She costs me a fortune. You saw that outfit she wore. . . .'

'She's still my wife. . . .'

'Don't be medieval. Wives are a convenience, an

economic necessity for the lower incomes. Grow up, earn money and own a series of mistresses—like I do.'

'Is that all Cathy means to you?'

'It's been my experience that nothing lasts—so why drag things out?' said Nick.

'How do you make so much money?' asked David.

'We still build the best aircraft in the world.'

'I can still see an old man after a fire bomb hit him.'

'Who the hell wants to go to Heaven?'

'You're not fooling me with all this interest in my future,' said David.

'I'm trying to help you—if you'd let me.'

'You're trying to use me.'

'You always were a bit bolshy,' said Nick.

'So that's your way out, is it?' said Dave. 'Throw mud. Thieving and lying isn't wrong if you're cheating a red! Bravo if you sneak a red's wife away!' Dave lost control for a moment. 'You even accuse me of being a communist!' he said.

'You really have swallowed the hook, haven't you?' said Nick. 'Take my advice, David. Keep that mouth of yours shut. The wrong people might overhear.'

'Aren't you afraid people might hear you?'

'They're not afraid of me. I only break the rules. I don't try to change them.'

His sentence was underlined by a ponderous knocking on the door. Neither moved. The knock was repeated. They heard the door open and a solemn voice speak: 'Pray silence for his Worship the Mayor.' Then they heard Will's voice invite both attendant and Mayor to go inside.

The Mayor stood framed in his gold chain of office.

'We heard your voices from the garden,' said his Worship, a small robin of a man with the same glitter in his eye.

'You overheard . . .' said Nick.

'Why the Mayor and his loyal citizens were kept waiting at the station,' said his Worship.

'What are you talking about?' asked Nick, but the Mayor was not listening. His little chest was puffed up and his head settled firmly on one inch of neck.

'I came to welcome home a warrior from the wars. I was kept waiting at the station—I suspect deliberately!'

'Come off your high horse,' said Will, 'you're up for re-election next month.'

'I'll defend the dignity of my office.'

'By listening at open windows?' asked David.

'Your own brother called you a bolshevik.'

'I said bolsky,' said Nick.

'Don't confuse disrespect for power with being a communist,' said Will. 'If David didn't want a civic reception no one can force one on to him. What's the use of him fighting for his rights in Korea if a blown-up official like you tries to take them away?'

'I didn't brand your son,' said the Mayor.

'What else did you overhear?' asked Nick.

'Sufficient to realize that you were both in earnest.'

'What's everyone scared about?' asked David. 'Have you lost your nerve that the mention of one word sets you accusing each other?'

'It's time you learnt some sense, anyway,' said Will to David.

'Sense?' asked David. 'I've been fighting and killing reds. I've heard a thousand of them screech down a hillside on a night so black that I couldn't see Butch, my own sergeant, standing five yards away. I've shot them and stabbed them and wiped their blood off my hands. All for freedom! And when I come home I see grown men tremble when I mention a word. Brave fellows, who've never heard a shot fired in anger are trying to tell me what I can say . . . or think! Who do you think stands fast when the enemy charges? The witch-hunters?'

No, not on your life. If you hate these reds so much, why don't you go out and fight them? There's always room for volunteers. Or are you a clever bastard who fights the war from an armchair?' Will nodded his head in agreement and looked from Nick to the Mayor.

'Are you a clever bastard?' he asked the Mayor.

David sat down and rested his feet on the mantel-piece. He started singing—'We'll keep the red flag flying here.' The Mayor's eyebrows stood up on their toes and dragged him out of the room, followed dutifully by the attendant. At that moment Butch walked up to David.

'You know what?' he said. 'How about you and me taking a look at the town? I'd like to try some draught beer and see some of those pretty girls I heard your mother talk about.'

David stood up. 'I expected some things to have changed,' he said, 'but not my wife and not values.'

'Let's go?' asked Butch.

'They say all's fair,' said David.

CHAPTER EIGHT

DAVID walked slowly away from the glittering fronts and big windows of the main street stores along the hollow twilit pavements of the silent business quarter. The typists and secretaries, lawyers and agents, had left behind the empty shells of dark-windowed offices. Only David's heart was emptier. He felt a thousand miles from home.

Town houses, fashionable fifty years before, edged the pavements. He'd walked this way often, to the park, to the river, but not alone, like this, miserable, empty, lonely.

Cathy was more beautiful than his memories. He could look at her all day without speaking a word, just look into her eyes. Everything about her called to him, dug fingers into his flesh and pulled him towards her. He looked at the empty buildings and felt the pain in his chest.

A tart in a doorway smiled to hide the dark bags under her eyes. Auras of scent hung like a net across the pavement. Her coat flapped loose. David looked away. He wanted lips as fragrant as the petals of an opening flower, not the smell of decay. He thought of Cathy on his last leave and felt his longing strain against the shackles of his self-control.

Twenty yards away, at the corner, red and challenging, stood a telephone box. He opened the door, flicked over the pages, then dialled. Her voice even over the lines set his nerves dancing.

'Catherine?' he asked.

'Yes,' she said and waited, then: 'Who is it?' she asked, her voice as pure and smooth as an evensong with an undertone that scraped his spine. She waited with a woman's patience and knowledge until he said:

'It's David.'

'What a pleasant surprise,' she said, and the microphone picked up and magnified the tremor in her voice. David was floundering. His thoughts danced riots to a central theme.

'I want to see you,' he said. She didn't answer at once. The silence in David's mind stretched to a high octave. Fibres began to curl back before snapping.

'Where?' she asked.

'Anywhere, somewhere quiet. Here. The park gates.'

'When?'

'Now.'

'Now?' she asked with consternation for a moment in her voice. A couple walked by slowly arm in arm. David counted their steps.

'I'm coming,' she said suddenly and rang off.

David looked at the receiver. He plonked it back on the stand, pushed open the door, walked three paces on to the pavement, looked up then down the street, filled his lungs, smiled, grinned at his smile and whistled softly a tune in step with his feet. From the park gates he could see twenty darkening miles across the green river valley to the grey foothills of the Pennines.

Five minutes later Cathy stepped out of a car driven by Nick. She watched the car, smooth as a snake, move off. She walked across, watching where she put each neat, high-heeled foot, until they faced David's, then she looked up at him with her eyes wide like headlamps blinding up a hillside. They looked deep into each other's soul until neither could bear the reservations. David gripped her hand. They turned and walked. She felt it as a sensation which soothed and calmed all along the line between his hand and her thoughts.

'Can you forget Nick for a while?' he asked.

She nodded her head. While she was with David she didn't need Nick. She might live with either one, but for different reasons.

She intercepted glances from passers-by and wondered if people recognized her from the *Evening Post* photograph in the same cotton dress.

'Where are we going?' she asked as the people became fewer. He stopped and faced her. Her body moved in to his as they kissed.

'I believe you could,' he said.

'What?' she asked.

'Forget Nick.'

'Why do you love me?' she asked.

'I don't know, I just do.'

'It can't be my character, can it?' she said.

David smiled despite himself.

'Brains, good looks,' mused Cathy, 'but no character. That makes me a perfect bitch!'

They crossed a footbridge and left behind the lawns and flower-beds for the river path. They sat on a bench and watched the dark waters drift by.

'I don't want to share you,' said David.

'I thought you said let's forget!'

'I made a mistake.'

'What you need is a drink,' said Cathy, 'you're back in the land of the living. There's a little pub by the next bridge.' She stood up and looked at her inadequate shoes. 'You'll have to buy a car,' she said, 'it's much more fun.' David wondered if sophisticated was the right word to describe the hard polish on her finger-nails, on her manner, on her words, the hard, brittle answer for his questions. But he thought he could see in her eyes that the hardness was only a shell.

The pub by the bridge held a passing fancy for a clique with more money than sense, a clique that rode sports cars for a thrill and avoided call-up because it was too dangerous, who spoke in loud voices and felt significant only when they had the attention of the whole company. A clique which admired Nick's car because it was the biggest and most expensive, not because the engine ran smoothly.

'Can we talk in there?' David asked.

'It should be empty now,' she said.

'I'd rather we were alone,' said David.

The room was dark and the ceiling low.

'Do you still drink beer?' he asked.

'Sometimes,' she said.

'What then?'

'I'll have a beer if it will please you.'

'A pint and a half of mild,' said David. The landlord was small, neatly dressed, smiled as if he really liked his job and pulled a steady pint with a good froth on top.

They sat in an alcove by a small window and looked across the cobblestones leading down to the river bank.

'Would you rather have a short?' he asked at last. She nodded.

'I only drink for effect,' she said. He stood up and ordered more drink.

'I started my bad habits while you were missing,' she said.

'We're all human,' he said and looked at her again.

Four pints later, the pressure of his thoughts burst past the control. 'I feel as if I'd come home for the first time'. . . ' said David. She smiled, touched his hand, then said:

'It's hard to believe that you really are here.'

'I know,' he said. 'Once I thought I'd never see you or this town again. When I die, I'd like it to be near home, not in a distant land.' He leaned forward and looked at her hand in his.

'What was it like?' she said.

'I'm still too near to know,' he said. She waited for the words to come. 'One thing stands out,' he said. 'I can remember looking round at the other lads and thinking here they are, smoking, talking, cleaning their guns, as if they'd all be alive in a week's time. I looked at their faces. No one would have guessed. I wanted to shout, "Don't you realize what's waiting round the corner?" Then I wondered, supposing I do live, what shall I do with my life, fritter it away like a pocket full of pennies at the Whitsun fair? I don't know where the answer came from, but there seemed a choice of two things. I could rear a happy family, love you and our kids, or, if I had ability, real ability, I could help make the world a better place for young lads who'd rather be playing football than killing each other.'

Cathy put her hand on his and blinked her eyes.

She thought, if only there were more Davids. She said: 'All we received was a telegram.'

David remained silent awhile then he said: 'We were half a mile in front of the main defensive line, with the Chinese all round. They swamped us during the night and retreated during the day. By that last morning, before they retreated they had killed us all, except Butch and myself. Butch got back safely . . .'

'Butch told me.'

'He lost a leg.'

'How did they treat you?'

'So—so.'

'Was there much propaganda?'

'Look, Cathy, before you can spot propaganda, you have to know the truth.'

'Do you know the truth?' she asked. David didn't answer for a long time.

'I know one of them is an honest man. Where there is one, there might be more.' Cathy laughed a shade nervously, and said:

'But can you just say that? Aren't you either for or against, even though you want to dither?'

'On the day I escaped I saw an old man burnt to death and left standing, like a charred stick. That's what I'm against.'

'But do you know which side really wants peace?'

'I have an open mind.'

'Like me, with you and Nick?'

'That's different!'

'Is it, when I know I could be happy with either you or Nick?'

'Then you can't love either of us.'

'Perhaps I think too much to love, perhaps I see too clearly, perhaps I'm too honest to pretend to an emotion I don't feel!'

A large car whipped over the bridge and raced across the cobbles. Brakes and tyres squealed. The engine roared and faded. The pub door opened. A big man,

all confidence in a large check hacking jacket, stalked in, leading two sweater-pushing girls, followed by a second man, a pale reflection of the first.

The man in the hacking jacket stood wide-armed with mock surprise when he saw Catherine. He turned and without pretence looked David up and down and said:

'My dear, where's the car? Don't tell me you walked!'

Catherine glanced quickly at David, then at the newcomer.

'What's wrong with walking?' asked David, standing up.

'Nothing, old boy.' The man touched his moustache. Cathy stepped forward.

'I'd better do the introductions,' she said. 'This is Meredith and Margaret, Mary and Sidney. This is David Duerden. Mary is dying to meet you.'

'Jolly good show,' said Meredith, 'didn't realize who you were,' then to the room at large: 'Have a drink. Glad to see you back home.' He walked across to the landlord at the bar. 'Looking smart tonight, Charley boy,' and fingered the lapel of the landlord's new jacket. 'Straight off the peg,' he suggested and laughed with his loud mouth.

'Four brandies for my party, a whisky for Cathy and whatever our friend Duerden had last time.'

The landlord smiled and said: 'O.K.'

'Mister Meredith to you!' roared Meredith.

'Mister Meredith, sir,' said the landlord, and wondered if it was worth while, even though the round cost seventeen shillings and sixpence. In retaliation he gave four under-measure South African brandies from a bottle mis-labelled five-star cognac.

Meredith lifted his glass in a big hand, rolled the liquid round the rim, tasted a drop voluptuously, then gave his verdict. -

'I know a good drop of brandy when I taste it,' he said.

'1925,' said Charles, glancing at his card.

'Good year,' said Meredith.

'Make your bloody appendix curl,' said Charles to himself.

David tried to cough the hair from his throat. He turned to Cathy.

'It's no use,' he said. 'I can't stomach this. Do you mind if we go?' Cathy raised her eyebrows.

'Go?' she asked. David stood up.

'You going already?' asked Meredith.

'Aye,' said David.

'Finish your drink, old boy.'

'No, thanks.'

'Can't we stay?' asked Cathy, looking with eyes that saw nothing unusual in Meredith's behaviour.

'We're going,' said David. The attitude of the four spectators made saving face the issue for Cathy.

'Why?' she asked. David looked at Meredith, then turned back to Cathy.

'Because I feel sick,' he said.

'Have some bicarbonate. I always use it.'

David ignored Meredith and spoke to Cathy.

'If you want to waste your life playing up to wealth...'

'No, not that!' said Cathy. 'You hardly know Meredith. He's generous to a fault!'

'Does he earn what he spends?'

'What's come over you?'

'Manners!' said Mary, hurt by being ignored by David.

'I've just come from a place where the money spent on that last round would have kept seven starving children in food for seven days,' said David.

'Food must be a damn sight cheaper now than when I was out there,' said Meredith.

'You're not the only one who's done any fighting,' said Mary.

'And there's not much we can do from here!' said Sidney, very bravely.

The landlord picked up a collecting box labelled: Korean Children's Fund. Meredith unbuttoned his wallet, pulled out a pound note, folded it and gave it to Charles.

'Put that in for the starving brats,' he said, then turned to David and said:

'Now, drink your beer.' David lost colour. Cathy could see the forces pulling.

'If you've earned that with the sweat of your brow it would have meant something,' said David. He took hold of Cathy's arm. She unloosened his grip, but avoided his eyes and said nothing.

The bell over the street door jangled on a broken spring. Nick stood in the opening, his eyes quickly accustomed to the gloom filling the low-ceilinged bar.

'I had an idea you'd be here,' said Nick.

'Let's go,' said David.

'I'm tired,' Cathy said, 'I couldn't even walk as far as the bus stop.'

'I walked right into it,' said David to Cathy, 'you knew they all used this pub.'

'It was the nearest!'

'You won't mind me leaving you with your friends, then.' He paused by Nick. 'She's yours,' he said, 'you make a fine pair.'

'Dave!' she said. David marched out.

'That's the way,' said Meredith, 'now let's get down to some solid drinking.'

'You'd better go after him,' said Nick, and watched her intently.

'What!' said Meredith. Cathy appeared not to hear, then walked to the bar and sat down.

'Give me a drink, Charles,' she said. 'Who's side are you on?' she asked Nick. 'Your own or David's?'

Nick leant on the counter. 'Why did you tell me to follow him?' she asked.

'I don't believe in kicking a man when he's down.'

'Not when there's a chance that he might stagger to his feet!' said Meredith.

'Kicking's no good. I prefer making friends,' said Nick.

'You ought to know,' said Cathy.

'He could be very dangerous,' said Nick. 'It's our job to fit him in somewhere. If we can't, someone else will.'

'Yet you still want me!' said Cathy.

'Cathy,' said Nick, 'this isn't just politics, or economics or philosophy, but life and death. I want you. I also want Dave to be happy. He's too good a man to lose.'

'He wants his cake and his halfpenny,' said Meredith.

'Know any reason why I shouldn't have it?' asked Nick.

'You're spoilt,' said Mary, wishing like hell that she'd had a hand in the spoiling.

'I'd like to go to Whinney's,' said Cathy, out of the blue. 'I want to dance and be gay. Life's short. I want to be surrounded by silly, empty-headed people who throw their money about. I'll turn to ethics when I'm too old to get what I want.'

'There's a girl who knows what's good for her,' said Meredith.

'Let's go to Whinney's,' said Mary. 'I wanted to go there at the start, but Meredith insisted on coming here!' Mary gave Nick a long, soulful look.

'Crafty so-and-so,' said Meredith, 'aren't you?'

CHAPTER NINE

DAVE walked away from the pub, crossed the bridge, then looked round despite himself and saw no one was following. He looked for her again as he jumped on the bus. He told himself that any woman would do, that all he needed was a bedmate, that to think there was only one woman in the world was stupid. He decided to pick up Butch and go whoring.

When David walked through the doorway into the lounge he found, not Butch, but a tall, hollow-cheeked, large-eyed stranger. The stranger smiled lopsidedly and his eyes looked sad. 'My name is Remington,' he said, 'and you are Captain Duerden.'

'Mister Duerden.'

'Congratulations on an improvement in status. Or is it?' asked Remington. His voice was pleasantly musical and the movement of his hands gracefully emphasized his words.

'It is,' said David.

'I might be able to help you,' said Remington, 'I'm from Whitehall.'

'You must think I'm barmy!' said David.

'Who mentioned signing on?' asked Remington.

'If you're not recruiting, why are you here?' asked Dave, then he nodded his head slowly. 'I see,' he said, 'more questions?'

'I'm here to help,' said Remington.

'I don't trust people who say they want to help!'

'Things have changed while you've been away,' said Remington.

'You show great discernment. Things have changed, including my wife.'

'Have all the people changed?' asked Remington.

'No, I've just left some people who are still only concerned with themselves and alcohol and big cars,' said Dave.

'And what are you concerned with?'

'I want to find out the truth,' said David.

'You could do worse than that,' said Remington.

David said: 'If I knew the truth, I could tell you what I'm concerned with.' He walked to the window. The sky was dark. 'There are times,' Dave continued, 'when my longing is physical, when I pray for the truth like a farmer praying for rain on his dry cracked land.'

'The truth about what?'

'What the hell we're supposed to do with our lives!'

'You were happy before you left home two years ago?' asked Remington.

'I have happy memories.'

'But you're no longer happy?'

'Things have changed.'

'Things or you?'

'Both.'

'You can do something about yourself.'

'Are you in the Chaplain's Branch?'

'No.'

'Intelligence?'

Remington nodded his head. He asked:

'How long did they interrogate you?'

'Long enough.'

'The same man all the time?'

'Yes.'

'Was it Major Sen Lutang?'

David looked at Remington with an expressionless face. Remington smiled through the silence.

'It was Sen Lutang,' said David.

'You ought to feel honoured,' said Remington, 'I have the greatest respect for the Major.'

'We talked together, every day, for months. One very long year,' said David.

'Voluntarily?'

'Not at first.'

'Why not?'

'At first it was either the Major or the firing squad who knocked on the cell door. While I talked it was the Major. So I talked.'

'What did you talk about?' asked Remington.

'Look,' said David, 'why not let me see those unpleasant thoughts spinning inside your head?'

Remington smiled wryly.

'Since you returned, as a hero, certain information has reached us,' said Remington.

'Just tell me a little,' said David. Remington made a steeple of his fingers.

'A convert that no one knew might be more useful than one who broadcast from the housetops,' he said.

'If you had proof. . .' said David. Remington raised his eyebrows.

'Proof?' he asked. 'How can you prove a belief?'

'Do you suspect me?'

'We suspect many people. Some we know must be innocent.'

'You suspect me?' asked David.

'You are the only man who has escaped.'

'Is anything wrong with that?' asked David.

'An Englishman is so obviously not a Chinese,' said Remington.

'I told you—I received help.'

'But you won't say who. . . .'

'While their identities are locked in my head, my helpers are safe. Once I told anyone, even you . . . they might lose their lives,' said David.

'Very convenient!' hinted Remington.

'So now you stoop to innuendo,' said David.

'I'm sorry,' said Remington. 'You set a high standard—for others.'

'But not for myself?' said David. 'Why don't you tell me outright what you want me to do?'

Remington leant forward into the opening. He said: 'If anyone not in the family circle or not an old friend tries to contact you—let me know. Don't chase them away, just let me know.'

'Surely they'll not rush in blindly?'

'They'll try to involve you, at once.'

'That's if I am a "convert".'

'Only you can answer that. Until you do, by your actions, I shall work from my knowledge of Major Sen Lutang.'

'Either you trust me or you don't,' said David. 'I shan't persuade you because I couldn't care less either way.' Remington stood up.

'You're honest enough,' he said, 'my only fear is that you're not clever enough.'

'You think someone is trying to make a fool of me?'

'A fool is a traitor.' Remington picked up his hat.

'And what about a wife-stealer or a profiteer?'

Remington could not ignore the question.

'They make it easy for the enemy . . .' then he added: 'If you need my help, I took the liberty of writing my number on your father's telephone pad.'

'Would you trust Major Lutang?' asked David.

'Not even if I was on his side!' said Remington.

David looked at the carpet.

'Is this talk part of my rehabilitation?'

'I think brainwashing is the correct term,' said Remington.

'Plenty of soap and water,' said David.

'We prefer to leave you alone. We think your home,

your family, your loved ones, will help you to return to sanity.'

'If they still love me. . . .'

'Yes, of course,' said Remington, 'if they still love you,' and walked to the door. 'Good night, Captain Duerden,' he said.

'Mister to you,' said David, without smiling. He watched Remington walk down the path.

'Has he gone?' asked Butch, leaning over the banister.

'Why?' asked David. 'Did he frighten you?' Butch jolted down the stairs, shook the house on its foundations, and said:

'He wanted to talk to you, alone.'

'Where are Will and Bella?'

'Dressing for dinner.'

'Come on, let's get out quickly. I don't feel like seeing them while I'm still sober.'

'Have you had another row with Catherine?'

'Why do you ask that?'

'You ask why—with a face the length of my arm?'

'Come on, Butch. I need a drink and no questions.'

The pub stood back from the main street and still had enough frontage for a coach and four horses to swing round. Brass ornaments studded the bar walls. A brass foot-rail, spittoons, sawdust and bowl of water for dogs added to the atmosphere. Butch and Dave sat on hard wooden wall seats in the alcove corner of the bar.

'I'm surprised,' said David, 'this strong ale's still called red label!' Butch was more concerned with a young lady.

'Say, Lulu,' he said, 'what time do you go home?'

'My name isn't Lulu,' she said. She wore no powder but spent her money on a violent lipstick and a perfume that whispered silk sheets and long nights. Her hair was

neatly curled over a narrow forehead. A short, slightly concave nose gave a clue to her nature and a wide mouth to her generosity. She had eyes, too.

'I have to call you something,' said Butch.

'Jenny,' she said.

'How long are you staying here, Jenny?'

'Late enough for you, mister.'

'Call me Butch.' Jenny laughed easily enough to show that she was still in her 'teens.

'What's so funny?' asked Butch.

'You really are a Butch?' she asked.

'What're you doing tonight?' asked Butch.

'Will you be with us then?' Butch lifted his pint and drained the last suds.

'I'll be here,' he said.

'Two more,' called David to the old man behind the bar.

'So you can talk,' said Jenny.

'Butch is doing the talking tonight.'

'Some of us girls like to hear a gentleman talk, occasionally.'

'Say, what do I speak, Chinese?' asked Butch.

'Occasionally I'd like to hear a woman keep her mouth shut,' said David into his beer.

'Fancy yourself, don't you?' said Jenny. Butch shook his head and frowned at Jenny.

'His wife's given him the brush-off.'

'I'm not surprised.'

'Dave's been away a long time.'

'Pity he ever came back . . . just a minute,' she looked at David's face, browned by the sun, then said: 'you've been away a long time—are you the one that kept the Mayor waiting?'

'That's right, lady,' said Butch and smiled as sweetly as his face would allow.

The stranger at the bar walked up to the alcove. He

paused awkwardly, frowned at the table. 'I'd like to buy you a drink,' he said, 'I'd consider it an honour.'

'No thanks, no more for me just yet,' said David.

'I'm sorry. I only . . .'

'I'll have one with you, mister,' said Butch. The stranger's face brightened.

'A pint?' he asked, then turned to the bar and called, 'Two pints.'

'Make it three, if the offer's still open,' said Dave.

'That's all right, Mr. Duerden, we all have our moods,' said the stranger. The barman slid three pints on to the bar top.

'Four bob,' he said.

'Here's five.'

'You're pushing the boat out tonight, aren't you?' asked the barman.

'Wait till I tell my boy about this,' said the stranger, turning to David. 'He's at the Grammar School. You're his hero—oh, I know you're modest—but you're a big thing in his life.' The stranger drank his beer at one swallow. 'Pity you weren't at the station,' he said, then: 'well, I'll be off now.'

'Have another before you go,' asked Butch. The stranger shook his head.

'Can I ask you a question?' said David.

'Yes,' said the stranger.

'And you'll give me a straight answer?'

'I've a good name,' said the stranger, 'I say what I think.'

'What would you say if I was a communist?'

'With your record?'

'Aye.'

'It's the sort of man you are that counts with me, not the label.'

'Suppose I had no record?'

'Everyone has a record, for those who can read it.'

'Is that the best answer you can give me?'

'It makes sense,' said Butch. David watched him walk out. He turned to Jenny.

'Do you know him?' he asked.

'He's a regular—a half a pint a night. That's all he can afford. He'll not be in for the rest of the week now.'

'Oh what a bastard I am!' said David. 'Why can't I believe, like he does!'

'You have a brain, Dave,' said Butch.

'I have a curse!' said David. Butch shrugged his shoulders.

'It's like this,' Butch said, moving his hand like a barn door swinging in an uncertain wind. 'You never know whether booze will make you gay or deepen the gloom.'

'Do you think so?' asked Jenny.

While Butch pressed forward with his campaign of seduction, David was drawn into conversation at the bar by a small wiry man with a monkey-brand face. David recognized him as Strefford.

'I couldn't help overhearing your conversation,' said Strefford. Dave looked at the flattened face and the shining lenses magnifying the bright eyes.

'You're the second today,' he said. 'The Mayor was the first. He listened at an open window.'

'You're a brave man talking like that in public.'

Butch, nudged by Jenny, looked round for a moment, then called out:

'Are you buying us drinks as well?' Strefford paused while he worked things out.

'Three pints,' he said.

'Does your friend know who he's talking to?' Jenny whispered to Butch.

'Dave's over twenty-one,' said Butch.

'That man's a communist.'

'A red? What am I doing drinking with him?' said Butch and glanced under the table.

'Aren't you going to tell him?' asked Jenny.

Butch shook his head.

Strefford sipped his beer, leant a little closer to David then whispered:

'We'd like to see you.'

'What makes you think I'm interested?' asked David.

'We have a mutual friend. Major Lutang. You can trust me.'

'I can read that in your face,' said David.

Strefford drew the curtains closer round his voice.

'Your contact address is 37, Vine Street,' he said and finished his beer.

'Good night,' said David and rejoined Butch.

'Do you know who that was?' asked Jenny.

'No!'

'He used to sell the *Daily Worker* outside the station!'

'I know,' said David. 'He was selling them before I left.'

'I'd like to hit the high spots,' said Butch.

'In this town,' said David, 'you drink yourself stupid then go home and sleep it off.'

'Or go to Whinney's,' said Jenny.

'What's Whinney's?' asked Butch, looking as sober as a judge, except for the intention in his eyes.

'It's a road-house,' said Jenny. 'Everybody goes there. There's dancing.'

'Any drinking?' asked Butch.

'They've a lovely bar,' said Jenny with an excitement which surprised David until he realized she wasn't much older than seventeen.

'Let's go,' said Butch.

'There's a bus every twenty minutes,' said Jenny.

'A bus?' asked Butch. 'Where's the nearest 'phone?'

As he rose, David looked again at Jenny. It's the beer, he thought, and the two years out of circulation. Jenny returned the look.

'You're not turning homosexual?' she asked.

'Not tonight,' said Dave, after a too long pause.

'Some men do after being jilted.'

'How many men have you known do that?' he asked.

She looked straight into his eyes.

'None,' she said and smiled. He smiled back. They faced each other in a moment of honesty and saw in each other's eyes friendship without sex, then they both looked at the table while they tried to explain the experience away in terms of beer. The spring door to the telephone booth swung back. 'Taxi's on its way,' said Butch.

CHAPTER TEN

THERE were more bottles of whisky on show behind the bar at Whinney's than in all the other bars in the district put together. There were also three barmaids, unequalled in the county, two brunettes and a blonde. Nick knew the brunettes. He meant to know the blonde. But for a while, both his body and his brain were devoted to Cathy as they danced a slow blues. His attention was not distracted even by the inflated breasts of the songstress, although he had filed away a favourable notice for future reference.

'You can't afford to be sentimental,' he said.

'Let's not talk about David,' Cathy asked.

'I'm only thinking about your own good.'

'That'll be the day, when you think of someone else.'

'What a name you're trying to give me,' he laughed.

'You love it,' she said, 'and that's why we all love you. You're a shocker complete with fur and fangs. So don't spoil things by pretending to be a lamb.'

'Do you still love me?' he asked.

'As much as I can love anyone.'

'As much as you love Dave, for example?'

'At this moment, yes,' she said.

'Suppose he should walk in.'

'Suppose he had your money, or even some money, or even some prospects. Suppose he was even polite to my friends!'

'Why don't you ask him for a divorce?'

'Public opinion, dear. He's a hero.'

'For the moment.'

'And what is that meant to imply?'

'That public opinion is fickle,' said Nick.

'Darling,' she laughed, 'one of the joys of your company is that you make no pretence at morality. Don't spoil it now.'

'I try to combine the delights of sin and the benefits of appearing moral,' he said.

'I like you,' she said. 'Everything's so simple and well organized when you're around.'

'I'm growing old,' he said. 'I want to keep what I hold without the fag of fighting for it. That's why I must appear to everyone else as very moral.'

'Let's stop thinking. Let's be natural,' she said as the music stopped. They sauntered back to the party table. Mary and Meredith were maudlin. Their heads drooped from their shoulders like wilting tulips. Nick, who had drunk twice as much as anyone else, pulled out a chair for Cathy. They sat down and listened to a few mouthfuls of moon from the crooner.

'How's your man management tonight?' asked Nick.

'Troublesome,' Cathy said.

'Let's walk over to the bar.' I want a private word in your ear. Excuse us,' he said and stood up. As they shuffled slow-footed round the perimeter he said:

'Our hero's just come in.'

'No!'

'With Butch.'

'He's in good hands.'

'They're both with a seventeen-year-old!'

'You're pulling my leg.'

'Go and ask him for a dance.'

'No!'

'So he still means something.'

'He does not!'

'Dance with him then, if everything's under control, and tell him that the job Will offered is tailor-made for him.'

'Why the interest?'

'If I can deny my competitors a good man, then it's good business.'

'Has your interest in Dave any connexion with the security trouble at the works?'

Nick paused, frowned a moment, then laughed.

'Haven't I just explained?' he asked.

'I think you're pulling a fast one,' she said. 'You're pretending to be moral again.'

'Just do as I tell you and I'll give you a five per cent. rise—if you pull it off. What'll you drink?'

'She looks a whore,' said Cathy.

'I'll sit in the front seat by the driver,' said Jenny.

'You don't trust me,' said Butch.

'I know the way,' said Jenny.

'So does the driver,' said Butch.

'I'll still sit in the front,' said Jenny.

The driver concentrated on the road and tried to ignore the toe-curling scent of the girl by his side.

'Drop me off at the town centre,' said David. 'I'm going home.'

'You mean that?' asked Butch, trying hard to sound disappointed.

'Oh no!' said Jenny, 'I'm not going alone.'

'What do you mean, alone?' asked Butch. 'I'll be with you.'

'You wouldn't let your friend go home alone,' she said to Butch, 'would you?'

'No,' said Butch in long-drawn agony.

'You can drop me at the town centre as well then,' said Jenny to the driver.

'Dave,' said Butch, 'you'd better come along. I don't think Jenny trusts me.'

'Do you want me along?' asked David. Jenny turned round, her face hidden in shadow.

'Yes,' she said.

'Make up your minds,' said the driver, catching in the corner of his eye the shadows on Jenny's sweater. Little tart, he thought, he ought to think. Little tart, he'd have said if his wife had been there, little tart, he thought, and glanced sideways again.

The car sped along the arterial road, through bed-ready suburbs, through green-shining traffic lights, over tyre-thumping crossroads, over and down a steep railway bridge, past the couple-strewn park to the softly lit windows of the country night-club.

'A quid,' said the driver to Butch.

'I'm paying for this,' said David.

'Fifteen bob,' said the driver.

'You make a good living,' said David.

'Drunks don't know the difference.'

'But you do.'

'What's that to do with milking cows?'

'Sour grapes,' said David, then: 'Good night.'

'Thanks, mister,' said the driver and kept the change.

The conductor, as soon as he recognized David and Butch, fussed around.

'Meet Herbert,' he said, never lost for something to say. 'Herbert writes songs—wrote the one they're playing now.'

'Murdering!' said Herbert, a fat bald-headed moron.

'Justifiable homicide,' said Butch.

'Herbert's a genius—tops the hit parade once a year.'

Butch looked Herbert up and round.

'Good evening, Genius,' he said.

'I ain't no genius—I just got a technique.'

'With the women,' said the conductor and tapped his nose with the flat of his hand.

'With song-writing,' said Herbert, then continued: 'It's logic. Mind you, it's the same with women. When you hit rock bottom what do you hit? Sex! So I write sexy songs. Sexy songs earn money.'

'Is that what you call technique?'

'Naw,' laughed the conductor, 'that's common sense. Tell him about the technique.'

'Three years ago, I wrote a song called "Let's do it now". Two years ago I added another "do"—"Let's do do it now". This year I wrote "Let's do do do do it now". Next year I might change the "now" to "here" and have, "let's do it here", or "there".'

'One day, he'll run out,' said the conductor.

'Not me, ain't you never heard of a thesaurus?'

'He get's an idea, one idea in a lifetime,' said the conductor, 'that's his quota. He's a moron. But boy, he makes it pay.'

Butch eased up to the bar.

'Two and a half pints of draught mild,' he called as gently as his loud voice and broad accent would allow.

'No draught beer,' said the barman, and turned towards another customer.

'I'll handle this,' said David. 'Come here,' he said to the barman, then quietly: 'My friend is not accustomed to these surroundings. We ought to help him all we can.' The barman looked sideways, trying to find either a cue or some support.

'But we have no draught beer,' he said, in a voice

that had once worked wonders with his fond mummy and daddy.

'We'll have three bottles of Bass, red label.'

'Yes, sir.'

'Good,' said David and felt a little depressed.

'Let's find a table,' said Butch, not particularly disturbed by the domestic troubles of a declining power.'

David glanced round the drinkers and dancers, all busy either drinking or dancing because they wanted to enjoy themselves. Then he saw Cathy at the bar talking to Nick. His first impulse was to walk out.

'Say,' said Butch, 'look who's over there.'

'Excuse me a moment,' said David and stood up.

'Dutch courage?' asked Butch.

'Could be,' said David, and walked over to Cathy. He looked with cold eyes at Nick and said:

'Do you mind if I dance with my wife?'

'Go right ahead,' said Nick. 'I'm here to make up the number—not to keep you two lovebirds apart.'

'Don't mind me either,' said Cathy, 'just put your money in and press button A.' Then she followed David across to the dance floor.

Nick watched Cathy and David lose themselves amongst the dancers, then he beckoned the blonde barmaid.

'A pint,' he said, 'and one for yourself.'

'A brandy,' she said and watched his reaction.

'A big one?' he asked. She smiled.

'I'll take the money,' she said.

'When's your night off?'

'Monday and Tuesday,' she said.

'I'll take you up on that, Miss . . .'

'Sally Jerome.'

The third time round, David said: 'Is this what you call living?' She didn't reply.

'Can't you answer me?'

'I'm waiting for the speech. Go on, make it.' This time when David didn't answer, Cathy said:

'Make your speech, darling, then let me have a turn.'

'Do you think these puppets are really living?' he asked, and looked at the band leader's broad shoulders, worn low off the neck.

She said: 'Just put your case forward, don't try to educate me.'

They danced with six inches of electric light shining between their bodies.

'What's your alternative to this . . . this . . . whatever-you-call-it?' she said.

'I'd close the place,' said David.

'Why?'

'Because it's a distraction.'

'People are enjoying themselves.'

'Like hell they are.'

'If you had the money you'd enjoy it.'

'We're back on the old topic. Sordid, isn't it?'

'It's too sordid for your high mind to stoop to earning a living.'

'I want to do a worth-while job.'

'How much do you think you'll earn?'

'Not enough for us to keep pace with your friends.'

'It might interest you to know that Will hopes you'll take on your old job at the factory.'

'Will or Nick?'

'Your father. He loves you.'

'People have reasons for doing things, I've found that much out.'

'Will has no reasons. He just loves you. He's built that way. It's normal.'

'Perhaps he's afraid of what people will think if I do social work in the slums,' he said, and felt exasperation stiffen her body. 'Cathy,' he said, and tried to pull her

closer, but her arms were steel buffers to his chest. 'I'll consider the offer,' he said.

'Thank God I didn't have children before you went away,' she said, 'and pity the girl who eventually gets you. Now it's your turn to listen. I'm not interested in the big, mind-scorching issues. I want a little freedom and enjoyment before I'm made pregnant. I want a good house for my children when they arrive. All you have to offer is a service any man can perform, and believe me, there's no shortage of offers!'

'Haven't you forgotten something?'

'What?'

'My love.'

'So in return for your precious love I'm supposed to bear your children, feed you and them, care for you when you're sick, bury you when you die and live the last ten years of my life on a widow's pension. Well you've got another bloody think coming!' She marched off the floor and left him high and dry. The bar was still open.

'Lost something, sugar?' asked Jenny.

'We're on whisky,' said Butch.

'I'm going home,' said David.

'Aren't you going to dance with me before you leave?' asked Jenny. David thought awhile.

'Do you mind, Butch?' he asked.

'Go ahead, so long as we understand who is seeing the little gal home.' David nodded.

'Don't I have any say in this?' asked Jenny.

'No,' said Butch.

'Let's dance,' said David. He saw Cathy at the bar. Her back faced him. He danced mechanically. The scent Jenny wore rose with the heat of her body. He tried to think of sniffing tar to cure a cold, tried to pretend her breasts were cold dumplings held up by muslin.

'Do you get any satisfaction out of this?' he asked.
 She seemed shocked that he should talk about it.
 'Don't you like it?' she said, withdrawing slightly.
 'You do it to please me, not yourself?'
 'I thought you'd like it. You seemed to.'
 'That's one thing a man can't lie about,' said David.
 She moved in closer again.
 'I thought you liked it,' she said, then: 'I'd rather you
 came home with me.'
 'Why?'
 'He's not quite like you.'
 'We'll see.'
 'Excuse me,' said Butch, and cut in. David stepped
 out.
 'Did I tell you how big my ranch was out West?'
 asked Butch.
 'No, honey,' said Jenny, wide-eyed and vacant like
 her favourite film star.
 'I got a thousand head o' cattle.'
 'And a refrigerator?'
 'Sure.'
 'And a washing machine?'
 'No, but I could get one.'
 'I'd like to live on a ranch.'
 'I got a beach hut in Florida too.'
 'You have?'
 'Sure.'
 'And a pent-house in New York?' she asked.
 'No, honey, always stay at a hotel in New York.'
 'Which one?'
 'Why . . . the Waldorf-Astoria, I guess.'
 'And in Washington?'
 'The Statler!'
 'Are you married?'
 'No. I'm looking for an English girl.'
 'What'll she be like?'

'Young and strong and easy to talk to. Good-looking. Nice lines . . . and warm-hearted.'

'Like me?' said Jenny.

'Now I come to think of it, sure, like you.'

'Why me?' she asked.

'You're the first white girl I've had my hands on in two years.'

'Are you serious?'

'Sure I am.'

'Have you really a ranch?'

'I got a pig farm at Broughton.'

'I don't believe you.'

'I'll take you home tonight.'

'I know I'm a small-town girl, but I don't believe a word you say.'

'How can I prove it?'

'Answer me a question.'

'O.K.'

'Do you want to marry me or to sleep with me?'

Butch ploughed an uneven course through a ruck of creepers. He realized one thing. Jenny might be young but she wasn't innocent. The thought shone through the alcohol fumes in his brain like the torch of liberty—but not quite brightly enough to drive away the shadowy fears of the King's two daughters. He looked at her healthy clear young eyes.

'Sleep with you,' he said, and thought of the wonders of nature and penicillin treatment. He tried to concentrate on the wild music streaming from the long-haired bandmen, but saw only bulging eyeballs and billowing cheeks forcing air into inadequate orifices. A low-foreheaded young woman sang through a ripe mouth, imploring someone to step a little closer and rape her. She held out bare arms well shaven at the pits, waggled hydraulic breasts and looked as if she knew love was a better game than Ludo.

You coarse, cynical man, thought Butch, and reckoned he needed more whisky to douse his scruples.

David looked round the dance floor, at the crude postures and the furtive, strained, empty expressions and wondered how harmful was the new opium the people had discovered. A little demon of thought broke out of its imprisoning brain cell and started to hiss, Why should you care? It was soon joined by others whispering—why be miserable, enjoy yourself while you can, you know what you want, you're too unselfish, at least have another whisky, you've had a bad time, they can't all be wrong, nothing will matter in a hundred years from now.

'Cheer up,' said Jenny, 'you look miserable!'

'Where's Butch?' asked David.

'He couldn't take his alcohol. He's being sick.'

'What'll you drink?'

'Gin and lime, please.' The waiter gave shorter and shorter measures as the night wore away, and no one was sober enough either to notice or to care.

'What time does this place close?'

'We can go any time you like.'

'What about Butch?' Butch looked pale. The spirits had closed in while he had been looking somewhere else.

'One for the road?' asked David. Butch knew it would flatten him, but also knew that a tough guy like himself had to have one for the road. So he said yes. The fumes from the raw spirit curled from the rim of the glass, spiralled up his nostrils and touched off waves of revulsion in the depth of his bowels. He should have said no. He started to talk, word after word, but no one was listening. An increasing audience watched him sway from the perpendicular, at ever more impossible angles, still talking, all the way down until he walloped the floor. He looked peaceful lying there with his eyes

closed and mouth wide open and half a noggin of whisky dribbling down his chops.

A few strangers started to laugh while two well-trained barmen with the knack of lifting dead weight carted Butch to a taxi waiting with the rear doors wide open like cauliflower ears. The leading waiter climbed into the taxi through one door carrying Butch's head and shoulders and climbed out through the other without them.

'985, Bow Lane,' said Jenny to the driver. 'We'll take him home to sober up.' She turned to David: 'Are you coming?' she asked. David listened to the screams from the trumpets, listened to the drums beating exhortations. Tomorrow seemed empty of meaning. No thrill of expectation urged early to bed, early to rise. Health increased the length of suffering, wealth deepened the depravity and the gift of wisdom would drive a man mad with frustration and sorrow.

'Let's go,' he said, and climbed into the taxi.

Jenny sat alongside the driver. The shadows under Butch's eyes looked like black enamel. There lies a man, thought David. It had taken twenty whiskies, three pints of beer, and two bottled Bass to flatten him. What's more, Butch could do it every night, until something packed in. Why not? What had life more satisfying to offer than drink, yet safer than lying senseless at the prostitute's feet? Salute to the senseless! That was life; sports cars and women, booze and night clubs!

'Celebrating?' asked the taxi-driver.

'Living!' said David. 'Didn't you know? This is living!' Jenny looked sharply and silently at the taxi-driver. David looked through the window. Street lights and houses, corners and shop windows, railings and trees whizzed past in a giddy panorama. Cathy, you bitch, he thought. You're driving me to this.

The taxi turned quietly off the main road into a street packed solid on either side with terraced houses, each fronted by the pavement, then the gutter, then the cobbles.

'985?' asked the driver.

'First past the next street lamp,' said Jenny.

'That's a lot of houses under one roof,' said David.

'One wireless between two,' said Jenny. The driver, thinking about giving change, stopped by the gas lamp.

'It's a good job minds are fixed firmly into brains,' said David to the driver, holding Butch's head, 'or my pal would wake up at the club without his body.'

The driver, who had lost interest at the mention of minds, nodded and said: 'Aye, that's right.'

Jenny opened the door, drew the curtains and pointed to a settee.

'On there.' Butch didn't move, not even a twitch or a sign or a groan. David paid the driver, who nodded to Jenny and said: 'I'll be at the end of the road . . .' and gave her a crafty smile before closing the door. Dave heard the taxi creep away. He stood, feet well apart, staring down at Butch.

'He's out. Flat out,' he said.

'You don't look too good yourself.' Dave turned and faced her. His eyelids narrowed and his lips tightened at the corners of his mouth. Jenny thought the expression horrible. She stepped back. He pulled out his money and counted it.

'Three pounds and some silver,' he said, 'is that enough?' and slapped the whole handful on to the table.

She stood still for a moment longer, then swept the money off the table. The coins thudded and rolled, the notes sideslipped backwards and forwards and landed gently on the carpet.

'Get out!' she cried, rigid from the clenched fists to the knotted muscles at the sides of her neck. In a

moment she became, not a tramp, but a young woman, flaming with anger. 'Get out,' she screamed. A child started crying upstairs, then a second.

'Take him,' she pointed to Butch, 'and get out! On the pavement, in the gutter. But get out of my house!' The crying seemed louder. David shook his head.

'I'm sorry,' he said. She brushed past him, opened what seemed to be a built-in cupboard door and ran up a dark narrow ladder. The crying stopped in two stages. When she came down she held a soiled nappy folded in her hand. She walked straight through into the only other room downstairs—the slop-stoned scullery, shining clean in the electric light. When she came back she knelt down and picked up the silver and notes and put them under a children's money-box on the mantelpiece. Her hands looked self-possessed, finger-linked in her lap.

'Whose children are they?' asked David.

'Mine.' David glanced along the mantelpiece and the sideboard, but could see no photograph.

'Where's your husband?' he asked.

'I haven't one.'

'You wicked woman.' David and Jenny both jerked round and saw Butch's eyes wide open, like two clouded glass marbles, one looking past Dave and one past Jenny. Then both eyes closed.

'Has he recovered?' asked Jenny. Dave shook his head!

'He's still flat out.' She shrugged her shoulders and unbuttoned her blouse down the front. 'I suppose you want your pound of flesh?' she said. She took off her blouse and stood in skirt and heavily boned brassiere and corset. She tapped her finger-nail on one of the stays.

'Feeding the two kids ruined my figure,' she said, 'still never say sag in my business.' David stood awkwardly still. 'You didn't think my figure was real?'

she asked. 'Poor fish,' she laughed, 'hook, line and sinker—and the bait wasn't even alive.'

'Which bait am I supposed to have swallowed?' asked David.

'You want some more?'

'How much flesh do I buy for three pounds?' he asked.

'The lot,' she said. 'On a good night, I sell four or five lots.'

'Four or five men?'

'Three quid a night's no use to me.'

'I think you're bluffing,' he said.

'If you want to talk while your money ticks away, it's all right by me.'

'You win,' he said. She pulled her skirt up and hitched it over her hips. David knelt down alongside Butch.

'Wake up,' he said and shook the senseless shoulder. Butch was far away over the hills.

'How the hell do I get him home?'

'The taxi's still at the corner of the street.'

'Waiting?'

'He knows the form, it's only been twenty minutes—he doesn't mind—it's worth his while.' David stepped towards the door.

'Why did you come here in the first place?' she asked, gentle in her victory.

'Why? Because I'm a fool. It takes me a long time to realize just how low people have sunk.'

'Oh dear,' she said, 'so it's all my fault, is it?'

'Listen, Jenny, it's not your fault but the system. Where's the taxi?'

'Turn left.'

David found Butch propped against the outside wall when he returned with the driver. They dragged him into the taxi.

No one noticed Nick's car down the alleyway, let alone Nick and Cathy sitting there.

'Which hotel?' asked the driver.

'I've a call to make first,' said David.

'Don't let it get you down, pal,' said the driver, 'all these women are the same.'

'It's the system,' said David, 'it's the bloody system!'

'They call it the oldest profession,' said the driver. 'I see a lot of it. They even had 'em in the Bible. It's human nature, not the system.'

'It's the system,' said David.

'It's human nature,' said the driver.

The taxi rattled up the high street, turned left by the mock-Gothic arcade, and down by the bus station.

'Drop me on the corner here—and wait. I'll be half an hour.'

'Suppose he wakes up?'

'He won't.'

'Praise be the Lord,' said Butch.

'He's coming round!' said the driver.

'Like hell he is. It's his conscience. It's the only damned chance it has of making itself heard.'

'Pity he's not awake to listen to it,' said the driver.

'Half an hour then,' said David and stepped down on to the pavement. He walked round the corner and down a side street, into the old town hidden behind the chromium-plated shops. His footsteps echoed ahead, stopping the breath in the burglar's throat. He halted outside a dingy shop window covered with posters, clippings from newspapers and notices of meetings stuck on the inside of the glass. He rattled the door handle in its rusty socket. A blade of light cut vertically through the darkness and threw the grotesque shadow of a man across the cuttings pasted on the window. As the door opened the light fell on David's face, but the man's features were hidden in the shadow.

'My name is Duerden,' said David.

'Come in,' said Strefford, and as he stood to one side, the light fell across horn-rimmed spectacles, down one side of his face, on a high cheekbone, on a deep-set eye and outlined a jaw in profile shaped like the head of an axe. With a sharp movement of a small head perched on a stunted body, Strefford beckoned David to enter.

Inside the shop, under an unshielded electric light bulb, stood an old kitchen table stacked with booklets, manifestos, hand-outs and back copies of the *Daily Worker*, all speckled with a thin film of dust. The door closed. Strefford walked across the shop to a curtained opening which led through into the parlour. David followed to the doorway, looked at a fat-bodied, high-foreheaded, again bespectacled man called Sebastian sitting at a cloth-covered table with his hands hidden below the ledge. His eyes were wide open, as if he had nothing to hide, and he looked straight at David, up to the very last moment before he started to talk. Then he looked away, his eyes wide with the innocence of assumed stupidity.

'We've been expecting you,' he said.

'I am not a communist,' said David, 'yet.'

'Why did you come here then?' asked Strefford. David sensed antagonism in Strefford's voice, perhaps hatred.

'He wants time to make up his mind,' said Sebastian. 'No one thinks the worse of him for that.'

'No one?' asked Strefford.

'He is keeping his promise—fortunately for Major Lutang,' said Sebastian.

'You knew the Major quite well?' said Strefford.

'What is this promise?' asked David.

'You needn't pretend to us,' said Sebastian, 'we are not the military authorities.' His gaze wandered vacantly across the table to the wall behind David, over his head, down the wall, back to the table, his eyes all the time expressionless to the verge of insanity.

'We know Major Lutang let you escape,' said Strefford. While Strefford talked, Sebastian watched David, noted the pause that followed the question, and continued to watch, immobile as a cat.

'No one helped me to escape,' said David.

'Why are you here then?' asked Strefford.

'He is seeking the truth,' said Sebastian, 'as Major Lutang told us.' Then, addressing David, 'The Major's superiors know that he let you escape—without authority. Let us hope for his sake that you see the truth as we do.'

'Is that a threat?' asked David.

'Shall we call it a statement of fact,' said Sebastian.

'I was invited to call here,' said David.

'As a seeker after the truth?' said Sebastian.

'I've seen much with new eyes since I returned,' said David.

'Then you are with us?' said Strefford.

'Almost.'

'Can we make a suggestion?' asked Sebastian.

'It's a free country,' said David, and brought a shriek of laughter from Strefford.

'Will you take back your old job in the aircraft factory?' said Sebastian. David laughed.

'You all want me to do the same thing,' he said and thought of Remington, Cathy and Nick. 'You all have my welfare in mind!'

'You must sign the membership form,' said Strefford.

'I don't give my word until I know I can keep it.'

'Naturally,' said Sebastian, his eyes starting the round tour of the wall and the table again.

'Is that all—take back my old job?'

'You want to lead a revolution?' laughed Sebastian, then: 'The nights of the sudden coup are ended. Today we tunnel and scheme. We play chess, a game we know well. We will do anything . . . Understand? Anything.'

'Don't tell me too much,' said David.

'Of course not,' said Sebastian, 'but like Major Lutang, indeed for his sake, we hope you will say "yes".' He stood up. David looked first at one then the other. Strefford opened the door.

'Good night, Comrade!' said Sebastian and watched David leave. Strefford closed the door and hurried back into the parlour.

'Well?' smiled Sebastian, 'you didn't seem to like him.'

'He's playing at being a revolutionary.'

'Dear Strefford, I am not interested in Duerden as a person. Once we manoeuvre him into the aircraft factory, the IOI is as good as destroyed.'

'I don't trust him,' said Strefford. 'I'll keep an eye on him.'

CHAPTER ELEVEN

DAVID climbed into the taxi waiting in the High Street. Butch was sitting upright in the corner looking like death dressed in blue shrouds from the street lamps.

'How do you feel?'

'Ill,' he said, his voice as deep and as hollow as the echo from a sepulchre. The taxi was well in its stride before Butch asked: 'Where've you been?'

David cut right across the line of the question and said:

'All the time the boys were in Korea, these civvies have been boozing and sexing.'

'Terrible, isn't it?' said Butch. 'Still we caught up a little tonight.'

'Democracy at work!' said David. Butch made a supreme effort, pointed his nose at Dave, corrected the squint in his eye, and said:

'Who elected you as the conscience of the world?'

'It's the way I'm built,' said David.

'This is a democracy, ain't it?' asked Butch.

'That's why we spilled all the blood,' said David.

'Then you ain't in office unless you've been elected,' said Butch.

'This is home,' said the driver, unimpressed by drunken bum-talk. Butch snorted derision at David, opened the cab door, stuck out his wooden leg, stepped towards the pavement which was further away than he thought, and nearly split himself up the middle in his efforts to retain balance and dignity. He lost both. David paid the driver and led Butch through the gate up the pebbled drive, past dark bushes and overhanging trees to the porch.

'Now keep quiet, we don't want to wake everyone up,' said David. Butch hiccupped. His belly heaved and forced a juicy gasp through gritted teeth. He turned and stumbled into the bushes, his progress marked by crackling branches and oaths.

Through the quiet air heavy with night scents of leaves and sweet smelling flowers, through the dark windows of sleeping households, tore the screech of a cat in terror of losing its virginity by human agency. David heard Butch pumping out the beer and spirits surplus to his capacity. Then followed silence broken by slow footsteps trailing over gravel, then a thud, then the hiss of a curse escaping through surprised lips. David waited. At last a dark shape breathing out fumes of alcohol filled the gap on the skyline. Dave thought once this would have been funny. Maybe it still is, but there are more important issues heavy on my mind. But why don't I laugh? This is funny. I should laugh. What's wrong with me? There's something wrong with people who don't laugh.

'There's a light on inside,' said Butch.

David turned his key in the lock.

'It could have been the bloody row I made!' said Butch.

Through two open doors they looked into the lounge and saw David's father, pipe in hand, sitting by the fire.

'I'm going to bed,' said Butch, 'I don't want the old man to see me like this.'

'He's been waiting up for a talk. He won't mind.'

'Enjoyed yourselves, boys?' called out Will. 'Come on in. Bella's in bed.'

'Do you mind if I sit down?' said Butch and collapsed in a chair. Dave raked the fire and threw on a few coals.

'Have a drink?' asked Will. Butch groaned and held out the palm of his big hand to ward off the dog that was trying to bite him again.

'You've had enough,' said David.

'Make way for the hot gospeller,' said Butch, 'he's riding again!' Will poured out the drinks at his elbow.

'Have you nothing better to do than booze?' asked David.

'You tell me something better—apart from women,' said Butch.

'Gambling?' said Will.

'Distractions,' said David.

'You want to lay off drink if it makes you moody!' said Butch.

'Let him talk,' said Will. 'Young men always talk.'

'Young men act nowadays,' said David. 'I asked a Chinese boy what he saw in the new regime. He said: "Under the old system I could work for a lifetime and still die old and poor. Now I'm the Mayor of Pusan!"' Will nodded his head.

'Aye,' he said. 'Die old and poor—that's bad. Yet many would choose to die poor if they could only be certain of dying old.'

'I don't know what you mean,' said Butch, 'but I'm sure you're right.'

'Ha-ha-ha!' laughed David, 'very funny. . . . Men

like you draped the dining halls of Pompeii in a drunken stupor while the lava flowed down from Vesuvius.'

'And I bet they didn't feel a thing,' said Butch, then after a brow-frowning pause asked: 'What the hell has Pompeii got to do with this?'

'Cheap mockery is always good for a laugh,' said David, 'but when you're alone before your God, see how hollow those jibes sound—and see who laughs.'

'Don't waste your time shooting down shadows,' said Will, 'level your sights on reality.'

'Booze is the best cure for cold feet,' said Butch, 'best cure for reality, too.'

'Reality?' asked David.

'Roses are red, violets are blue,' said Butch, 'that's reality. Now ask me another.'

'Why are we here?' asked David, 'on this earth, in this universe, in this earth composed of nuclear universes, in this universe which might be a piece of soil about to be trod on by some giant on a mammoth earth?'

'You mean little fleas on a bigger flea's back and so on *ad infinitum*?' asked Butch, and scratched his backside.

'Is that what we are?' asked David, 'glorified fleas? Clever fleas who can brew and drink intoxicating liquor? Who can build tractors and ploughs to scratch the earth?'

'Let's all have a good laugh at the cobalt bomb!' said Butch.

'I don't like your sense of humour!' said David, then turning to Will: 'You are a wise old man. Tell me, why are we here?' Will raised his hands.

'Why? It depends on you, on what you want to believe. You choose between the soul and the flesh.'

'I want to stop people wasting their time chasing a mirage.'

'I like Marilyn Mirage,' said Butch. 'I could chase her all day.'

'You can't chase a picture in a glossy magazine,' said David, 'you just slobber over it!'

'Maybe Marilyn's better that way. Maybe she's not so hot in the flesh. Maybe she's hotter in a man's mind!'

'If people haven't the sense to keep their minds off distractions you must remove the distractions.'

'You need a lot of power first.'

'We'll get that.'

'I'll come back in a lifetime—there'll be no Marilyn but there'll be someone or something else.'

'When you know you're right nothing can stop you,' said David.

'Do you know you're right?' asked Will.

'I wish to hell I did!' said David, then: 'I wouldn't waste my time . . .'

'Is talking to your two best friends wasting your time?' asked Will.

'Sure is,' said Butch, 'when you could be drinking with them.'

'You called me a wise old man,' said Will.

'Sure,' said Butch.

'We're not on this earth to do anything,' said Will, 'it's the way we do whatever we do that counts.'

'It sure is,' said Butch, his voice husky with the lechery in his mind.

'You can apply the great truths in every walk of life,' said Will.

'And the great lies,' said Butch.

'It's only in truth that we'll reach Heaven,' said Will.

'Who wants to go to Heaven?' asked Butch. 'There'd be no such thing as good men if it wasn't for us bad 'uns and no place called Heaven if there wasn't Hell. So you'd better pour me out a drink. You'll be paid for it when your harp is issued.'

'All talk and no action,' said David. 'Talk's a waste of time unless it leads to action.'

'I like talking. I like drinking. I suppose you'd say drinking was a waste of time unless it led to a drunken stupor,' said Will.

'Or bed!' said Butch.

'Or action in bed?' said Butch after further thought.

'I could listen to you two all night,' said Will.

'All night every night?' asked David, 'where would that leave us?'

'It's not important,' said Butch.

'Whatever we believe to be important, is important,' said Will. 'We have the freedom to believe. No one can take that away from us. What we believe, is.'

'I believe that bottle is empty,' said Butch, 'and if it isn't it soon will be. That's the extent of my philosophizing. Call it a tune on an empty bottle.'

'My two best friends,' said David, 'and you're no help to me. My wife—she's no comfort.'

'Everyone's out of step, but our Johnny,' said Butch and shook his head sorrowfully.

David switched the light off in his room and lay flat on his back waiting for his eyes to see in the dark. At first he found it difficult to distinguish between the various depths of shadow. The window was light enough and the corner by the wardrobe pitch-black, but between those extremes, shapes and sizes were indeterminate. He closed his eyes and tried to sleep.

The following morning he awoke before the rest of the family and ate bacon and eggs in the shadow of a morning paper propped against the coffee pot.

The headlines bawled that the Chinese had mounted another offensive, shouted that the gallant pocket was still surviving after twenty-three days, reported that the politicians were still talking, said the footplate men were striking because they had to sleep in strange beds

and whispered that A.B.C. holdings had declared a record dividend and that old-age pensioners would have their income stabilized at the 1946 level.

David tasted every mouthful of breakfast but somehow it failed to fulfil his expectation. The reality in his own home was a pale reflection of the vision dreamed by the starved prisoner in the fly-blown cell.

He scribbled a note: 'Be back tonight,' and signed it with love. He closed the front door quietly and hurried down the garden path along the road. He caught an early bus crowded with workmen. The top deck was blue with smoke and denims, and the salty conversation of adult men who knew the struggle for survival could either be won by co-operation or lost by internecine war. There was a happy masculinity in the ribaldry and the laughter, refreshed after a night's sleep.

David looked through the windows as the bus escaped from the suburban mousetraps and tore along between green hedges and over the flats of the river valley. It reminded him of the countryside away from the front line, green peaceful fields yet threatened by war and exploding shells.

As the road climbed up and over a wooded rise, so the engine strained and the chassis shuddered. Men dimped cigarettes and stowed the savings away in tin boxes, in special pockets or behind ears. Away in the distance at the end of a black runway against a green hangar stood a silvered aircraft, slim and smooth in the sunlight. A hush of pride stilled conversation as everyone peered through the windows.

'She looks beautiful,' Dave said.

'Aye,' said his neighbour, 'nothing but the best in her.' The bus stopped at the main gate of tubular steel and wire-netting. The men filed through turnstiles, showed identity cards, clocked in and walked to various workshops.

David hesitated, listened to the urge to walk away, listened to the urge to press on, looked beyond the mackerel sky and wondered why oh why there had to be conflict. A voice he knew cut through his indecision.

'Good morning!' He turned slowly and saw Nick smiling through the open window of his saloon.

'You don't want this entrance,' Nick continued, 'climb in—I'll give you a lift.'

The gateman brought a pink pad, Nick filled the form in duplicate, handed one to David and said: 'This'll see you through safely until we make up a permanent pass,' then he shone his own into the guard's face and drove at ten miles an hour along a concrete road lined with saplings and flanked by coarse unmatured lawns to the long, low, wide-windowed administration block.

David began to wonder if his salvation lay in work, back-breaking work that would make him too tired either to think or to fight. Work, thought David, work and forget.

The mood disintegrated when the car stopped, for, staring out of a broad window by a door marked 'Use this entrance', stood Remington. Nick waved a casual hand and turned to David:

'You can see Remington when we've fixed you up with a job.'

'I thought he was from Whitehall?' said David.

'He moves around,' said Nick. David felt a foreboding. He tried to dismiss it. Why couldn't they leave him alone?

Nick ran up the stairs two at a time and strode along the corridor to his office. David hastened not to lose contact and found himself in a large square office with windows commanding a view of the triangular runways and the beautiful jet aircraft.

'She'll earn millions of dollars,' said Nick, 'and she's ahead of anything in the world.'

'Are there any snags?' Nick hesitated with his eyes staring fixedly at David's.

'We run up against a minor one from time to time,' he said.

'It looks beautiful,' said David. They both stared at the smooth lines, then abruptly Nick sat down and said:

'Will wants to train you as a personnel manager. You start in the shops, with the pay clerks. Salary five hundred a year. At the end of three months' training, £1,000, rising to £1,500.'

'Why?' asked David.

'Why £500?'

'Why personnel?' asked David.

'Because you have qualities of leadership. The men know your record. They'll listen to you.'

'No strings?' asked David.

'Maybe Will is trying to help both of us over a bad patch. Maybe it is fate.'

'You believe in fate?'

'Fate with a sardonic sense of humour?' asked Nick, 'there are times when I do.' David nodded his head slowly.

'Perhaps we're both mixed up,' said David. 'Then where does Cathy work?'

'We'll keep our private life out of our work. No matter who Cathy chooses, this jet 'plane will still be flying. Let's keep things in proportion.'

'Is that all Cathy means to you?'

'That's all any woman should mean to a man—a bedmate, and eventually the mother of his sons. If you think a woman can be anything more, you're either a fool, or weak.'

'Perhaps I'd better get started on this job,' said David.

'I'll put you under Mr. Strefford.'

'Who?'

'Mr. Strefford. Why, do you know him?'

'The name seems familiar . . .'

Nick frowned for a moment. He thought Dave was a poor liar. He pressed a button. A buzzer sounded. Catherine opened the door, looked at Dave without expression.

'Good morning, Catherine,' said David.

'Good morning, David,' said Cathy.

Nick said:

'Take David down to Mr. Strefford in "B" Shop.'

A lid flickered under Cathy's left eye.

'Not Strefford, surely,' she said.

'Now what the hell have you against Strefford?' asked Nick.

'He's not a very pleasant type.'

'David's going into personnel. He must learn why things go wrong before he can put them right. Strefford's his man.'

'Here's the morning mail,' she said and walked past Nick as if he'd been a stranger.

'Come and meet Mr. Strefford,' she said to David, and led him out of the office.

'Why have you come back to the factory?' she said as soon as the oiled lock of the door had clicked and they were safely in the corridor. David listened to her heels tap-tap to the rhythm of her walk. He was aware of her scent, her body moving, her personality, the way she wore her clothes, aware of everything about her. He restrained his hands from gripping her shoulders and shaking the poison of riches out of her soul and replacing it with his love.

'Why did you come back to the factory?'

'That's what you wanted, isn't it?' he asked. She kept her eyes looking straight forward.

'You'll not make trouble?' she asked. He did not reply. If only he weren't so remote and bitter. If only she could be sure he would understand. But she was afraid of the tightness around his lips and the hard

line of his jaw, afraid of his hatred of 'the system', was afraid he might say, 'You will do what Sebastian says. He is our leader.'

She led the way out of the building, across a wide stretch of concrete towards a hangar marked Shop 'B'. They passed a group of overalled men who eyed her up and down and turned round for the rear view after she had passed by.

'What time does everyone lunch here?' he asked.

'Twelve thirty.'

'Can we eat together?'

'I'm eating with Nick.'

'Shall I see you tonight?'

'What's happened to Jenny?' asked Cathy.

'Everything that could happen,' said David, 'happened before I met her.'

'Does that make us even?'

'I want to take you out to dinner tonight,' he said. She stopped short of the side-door to the big hangar. She smiled in his face. Before he could do anything the door opened and the moment was lost among the coarse laughter of three sex-conscious, teenage girls and the clatter of the engineering workers. The girls glanced first at David, then at Cathy, then passed round a knowing look amongst themselves. A big strong man walking close alongside a girl with a figure like Cathy's projected only one picture on to the screen of their imaginations. And the look showed they had all seen the same picture.

'I'll pick you up at the flat,' he said.

'I'll put on my low-heeled shoes,' she said, then led him along the concrete gangway between the working benches and the huge fuselage of the aircraft that made pygmies of the technicians at its feet. She led David to a hardboard hut with a long glass window and a brightly lit interior.

'I'll leave you here. That's Strefford sitting down.'

'Hadn't you better explain who I am. . . .?'

'Nick will have telephoned.'

'Don't you like Strefford?'

'Not enough to seek out his company.'

'Until tonight then.' She placed her hand for a moment on his forearm and said:

'Be careful, David,' then she turned and walked away.

He watched her beautiful walk, firm-limbed, erect, rhythmical. She has everything, he thought, and I have nothing. As she went through the outer door he heard the rattle of rivets being driven home by steel-beaked woodpeckers, heard the shrill teeth-scraping whine of electric drills piercing shiny rimmed holes in sheet metal.

Remington sped his car down the hill under the overhanging trees, out into the sunlight and over the bridge spanning the river. He felt good. The sun shone from a clear sky. He was thinking of Nicholas Duerden's secretary, Catherine, wife of David Duerden.

The car raced across the flat plain of the valley and climbed as easily up the hill as the aircraft taking off from the work's aerodrome and flying high into the sun, shining like the millions of silver dollars the experts predicted it would earn.

Remington stopped the car at the iron gates, flicked his pass, smiled approvingly when the guard asked to see it properly, then drove at precisely ten miles an hour over the concrete road to the white administrative block fronting the airfield with the big camouflaged factory hangars in the background. His car lock clicked neatly as he swung the door.

He watched the beautiful aircraft glide across the tarmac, glanced up at the narrow streamer of office windows and walked on long thin legs into the administrative building.

As he breasted the top corridor, Catherine was walking along towards him. Remington fell in alongside her and said: 'Do you know why Nick wants me?' Catherine puzzled a moment, then replied:

'I believe there has been some more trouble.' They walked on in silence.

Nick kept no one waiting. It was one of his few principles. When Remington walked into the office Nick shoved a pile of papers into a tray and asked Catherine for another cup of tea.

'You wanted to see me?' asked Remington. He saw Nick as a tough, self-confident man, blessed by phenomenal luck rather than by brilliance. Nick picked up a handful of nuts and bolts from his right-hand drawer and put them on the table under Remington's nose. Remington picked one up, turned it over, tapped it gently on the table, then asked:

'What's wrong?'

'Unscrew it.' As the bolt turned easily a gash of white metal shone in the sunlight.

'How did you discover this?'

'The testing bed.'

'The X-ray?'

Nick nodded. 'Look, Remington, to me you're just another technician, a security technician. You have a job—security. Now what the hell are you going to do about these bolts?'

'There are known communists in your works.'

Nick laughed. 'Any damn fool can pick out a self-confessed red, they're the honest ones. They're not the ones who commit sabotage. We're worried about the undercover boys. At least I am!'

'So am I!'

'Well? Could you let me into your plans? After all it's still our factory.'

'You're working on a Government contract.'

'That was our first mistake!'

'That's not very patriotic.'

'Neither's your damned inefficiency.'

'I'll take these nuts and bolts with me,' said Remington. 'You've no need to concern yourself any more. Everything's under control.'

'Could you see your way to expand that statement—or do I have to telephone the Minister!'

'Do you want to help?'

'Naturally.'

'Well, persuade your brother to take back his old job at the factory.'

'He's already here!' said Nick.

'I want to use him as a decoy—for the undercover boys you're so worried about,' said Remington, slowly.

'What does that make David?'

'They don't interrogate a man for months then let him escape for nothing.'

'Let him escape?'

'Isn't that your idea also?'

Nick saw himself in a new light and wasn't flattered.

'David's been decorated,' he said, 'for courage.'

'No political party has a monopoly of courage—or justice.'

'If he's out of his mind we must help him back to sanity,' said Nick.

'My business is security not male nursing.'

'I'd not lead my worst enemy into a trap,' said Nick.

'Look, Nick, you're a big business man whether you like it or not. These reds are out to break people like you and they don't care what methods they use.'

'Mr. Remington, I've no quarrel with a man's ideas. I only act when he breaks the law. Someone wilfully endangered life by fixing those bolts. Now you find out who it was and leave my brother to his friends.'

'And his wife, no doubt,' said Remington slyly.

'I think you'd better get out while you're still in one piece.' As Remington left, Nicholas buzzed for Catherine.

'Look here,' he said. 'Your relationship with David is your business, but if you still think anything of him, and if he'll listen to you, ask him to keep the job Will offered. He'll not get £1,000 a year anywhere else.'

'Can I ask why?'

'The Devil finds work for idle hands,' he said.

'Talk won't do any good now,' she said.

'We'll see,' said Nick. 'Now get the hell out of my office. I've a sick aircraft on my hands.'

'The 101?' she asked.

'Yes,' he said.

David walked up to the pay clerks' cabin, knocked and entered. As the glass door closed, Strefford looked up from his books, but no trace of recognition showed through his thick-lensed glasses.

'You've wasted no time,' he said.

'Has the boss 'phoned through?' asked David.

'Your Brother Nicholas?' sneered Strefford. David thought he understood Cathy's distaste.

'He wants me to explain the job,' continued Strefford. 'It's quite simple. To build each aircraft takes about 250,000 processes. Each process is given a rate of pay. As each process is completed the worker hands in a card for that job. At the end of the week his cards are added up and he is paid accordingly.'

'What do we do?'

'The management want us to make this system work smoothly.'

'But you don't . . .'

'No,' said Strefford, 'I don't. And what is more, neither will you.'

'Why?'

'It's a bad system.'

'Can't we improve it?'

'We'll never improve it until we are the bosses.'

'What do we do meanwhile?'

'We encourage some of the men to fiddle.'

'How?'

'We see they have more cards than they have done jobs. They are paid for more than they have done.'

'Isn't that dangerous?'

'Oh, one day they'll count the aircraft and find that they paid for one too many.'

'You're quite proud of yourself, aren't you?'

'That's not the whole story,' sneered Strefford, 'the management see that cards are being used quickly by some workers so they reduce the time allowed for the job.'

'Is that all?'

'All? It makes the party workers content for they gain more money but the non-party workers feel they are slaves working against the clock.'

'But surely they'll find out?'

'The system is too complicated for anyone to understand. It's grown out of hand. I know more about it than anyone. I'm the expert and what I say goes. They'll never find out.'

'Not even when they find they have paid wages for twenty aircraft and only made nineteen?'

'That's too simple a check, why, a child could think of that. No, my friend. We are quite safe. They wanted something complicated, and they've got it.'

David felt tired. His head bristled with form numbers, job names and department locations. His head buzzed with the scream of drills and the shudder of electric rivet guns. His feet ached with tramping over miles of hard grey concrete. His lungs felt clogged with fine metal dust. He looked at the electric clock, watched the black second finger glide round the white ring. He

turned towards the cabin door as Strefford walked in. 'Do me a favour,' said Strefford and lifted a string shopping bag from the corner where the coats hung. 'Drop these in the shop for my wife. It's near the bus stop, where you called last night. I'm working late and the wife'll play hell.' David thought he looked human for the first time. He glanced through the string mesh at the grease-proof wrapper enclosing the loaf of bread, at a tin of fruit, at bacon and margarine.

'Where?' David asked.

'Same place you went last night—almost opposite the bus stop.' Strefford pushed the bag on to the wide ledge running the length of the window. 'The management want me to answer some queries,' he said, and walked briskly through the door towards the exit.

Strefford walked neither to accounts nor to the administrative, but to Remington's office. He knocked on the door. Remington called out:

'Come in.' He pointed to a chair. 'Have a seat.'

Strefford folded his hands in his lap, sat straight-backed, patient, inscrutable, with the light from the window glancing off his spectacles.

'Do you know why I sent for you?' asked Remington.

'No.'

'Why were you in the plans room?'

'I often go there.'

'You seemed to take more than a passing interest in the new engine drawings.'

'I was being polite.'

Remington opened his drawer and pulled out a packet of cigarettes.

'Do you recognize this?'

'Cigarettes?' said Strefford and smiled. Remington wondered why a man who had no sense of humour should smile when asked to name a packet of cigarettes.

'Help yourself to one.'

'I don't smoke.'

Remington pushed the packet across the smooth top of his desk.

'You've never seen cigarettes like these before.'

'I'll take your word for it.'

'It's a camera.'

'Are we going to manufacture them?' asked Strefford.

'It was found in the plans room this afternoon.'

'It's not my job to prevent plans being stolen.'

Strefford leant forward, but his face was inscrutable. He wiped a thin film of sweat from his upper lip, but the closeness of the evening might have caused that.

'Are you accusing anyone in particular?'

'You were in the room.'

'Are you accusing me?' asked Strefford.

Remington felt the anger grow large in his throat. He wanted to snarl and shout at the clever little swine but the rules were against him. He thought, one day Strefford would make a mistake—if he was a spy.

'I hoped,' said Remington, 'that you might have seen something unusual.'

'I know nothing about plans.'

'I mean persons, not things.'

'I saw nothing unusual.'

'Do you want to help?'

'Of course.'

'Will you allow yourself to be searched?'

'Of course!'

'Of course,' said Remington. 'Whoever was clever enough to take a photograph and plant the camera in the head draughtsman's overcoat pocket would be too clever to carry around the films himself.'

'You think this spy was clever?' asked Strefford. Remington saw a little splinter of hope shine through the gloom. He shrugged his shoulders like a fighter who at last sees a gap in the defences of his opponent.

'I don't mind telling you,' he said, 'that he's the cleverest I've ever come across . . . but of course, this is of no interest to you—you are just being polite again.' Strefford's eyes shone.

'Were there no finger-prints on the camera?' he asked.

'Not one!'

'What action do you propose?'

'We shall search everyone as they leave,' said Remington.

'Everyone?'

'Unless they refuse.'

'I'm sorry I cannot assist you.'

'Only a genius could help now,' said Remington.

'And I am not a genius. . . .'

'No you aren't, far from it, I should say,' said Remington, and gave the flimsy line a jerk and felt the hook bite fast. He stood up. 'Still,' he continued, 'you can keep your eyes open and tell me anything you chance to notice.' Strefford walked to the door.

'The blind leading the blind,' he said and watched his last shot stick in Remington's throat, before he stepped into the corridor.

CHAPTER TWELVE

DAVID listened to the hooter, watched the men switching off lathes, unplugging drills, wrapping the flex in neat coils. The engine noise died away and was replaced by the murmur of conversation and the rustle of man-power. David looked at his workmates, pale-faced in the artificial strip lighting. It would soon be winter, then they'd work through all the daylight hours.

Now, in summer, while the sun shone, they worked all day long under a corrugated iron roof so that they could buy television pictures of rivers and cornfields, buy pictures of people playing games, dancing, singing. Soon they would forget the real joy of playing and doing and the figures on the screen would become the reality, and the programme controller a god.

He picked up the string bag and joined the stream flowing between the jigs towards the wide-open door. The colours outside were so bright that they hurt his eyes. He looked at the men at his elbow. Their faces were grey and greased and flecked with metal. Their eyes were set deep in wrinkled cavities. They were driven by a common thought, escape from the silence imposed in the factory by deafening noise. To the world around them they paid no attention. No heads looked skywards, no eyes caught and kept some of the blue of infinity. They scuttled along from the big box of the factory to the little box of the council house.

'It's another search,' said a man up front.

'Who are they searching?' asked David.

'Everybody,' said the small man at his elbow.

'Have they a warrant?' asked David.

'What's a warrant?' asked one.

'They always do it,' said another.

'Do you let them?' asked David. The men nearby looked at David as if he was mad, not mad by accident but by intent. They edged away, talked to someone else. It was dangerous to speak against authority.

David shouted: 'Don't let the bastards grind you down!' He walked out of the patient queue, pushed his way through to the tables where the factory police sat and undid parcels, put one foot on the table, jumped up, walked across and jumped down on to the floor the other side.

'Hey!' shouted one of the Works' Police. Once he

had been a prison officer, but they'd sacked him for brutality to the prisoners. 'What have you got in that bag?' he asked.

'An aircraft engine,' said David, 'want to buy it?'

'Let's have a look.'

'Keep your hands off, mister,' said David.

'I'm a security man.'

'You're just a bloody nuisance. Out of my way,' said David.

'Hey, Charley. An awkward customer, here.'

Charley, a big man, lumbered across and peered at David, then said to the first one:

'You know who this is?'

'No,' said the first guard.

'David Duerden,' said Charley.

'Not the boss?'

'His son. The one who got the medal.'

'Sorry, sir!' said the first and touched his hat, as he had done when M.P.'s had visited the prison. David looked at the potted faces watching the little tableau. He wanted to kick them all up the rump and shout what about your rights? But all they wanted was to get the search over and watch oblique breast shots on their television sets. He swung the string bag under his arm and ran and caught a moving bus, only to be told by the conductor that it was full.

'I'm on, aren't I?' asked David.

'Only five standing.'

'You can't count,' said David.

'Do you want me to stop the bus?'

'Please yourself!' The conductor rang the bell once. The passengers looked at David, then quickly away, but no word was spoken.

'We don't start while you're on!' said the conductor.

'You bloody little tyrant,' said David and stepped off the platform. He walked slowly back to the next bus

in line. Bloody little dictator, he thought, but it's not his fault, it's these weak-kneed twirps who make him like that. By the time the bus had reached the town centre the indignation in David's breast had simmered down. The new conductor had been friendly, even jolly. The workmen had seemed less cowed. Perhaps the effects of a day's work were wearing off. They seemed more as they had been early in the morning—after a night's sleep.

David dodged between buses, earned a rude word from a driver, turned off the main road along worn flagstones to the shop. He knocked three times. The net curtains at the window darkened, then, a while later, the door opened. Sebastian stood there smiling.

'You've made it,' he said.

'I've brought Mrs. Strefford's shopping home,' said David.

'Hee-hee,' Sebastian laughed, 'that's a good one! Heeee-he. But come in!' He took hold of the string bag and led the way into the parlour.

'Where's Mrs. Strefford?' asked David.

'You can drop that now.'

'Drop what?'

'There's no Mrs. Strefford,' said Sebastian, concentrating more on the sliced loaf than on David's question. He removed the clean waxed wrapper, stood the bread on the table and examined each slice individually. Half-way through, he found a small off-white cylinder embedded just within the crust.

'Success!' he said. 'Let me congratulate you on your first mission!' He held the cylinder high between his finger and thumb.

'What mission is this?' asked David.

'Just a minute,' said Sebastian. He walked through to the kitchen. David heard triumphant laughter, then Sebastian returned.

'You have proved yourself!' he said. 'Let us drink to success!'

'What success?'

'That was the film of the plans!'

'What plans?'

'Come, come, this is taking a joke too far,' said Sebastian, resting his huge stomach against the side-board as he passed out two drinks.

'What plans?' asked David. Sebastian turned with a glass in each hand. He stared at David.

'The plans of the new 'plane,' he said and held out the glass. David took it mechanically and turned away while he tried to organize his thoughts.

'Strefford told me it was his wife's shopping,' he said.

'Even better!' said Sebastian. 'You obeyed without question!' Sebastian raised his glass. His eyes glittered with the appreciation of his own cunning.

'Here's confusion to the enemy,' he said.

'No!' said David and threw his glass into the dead fireplace. Sebastian lowered his quietly to the table.

'No?' he repeated softly. 'Are you afraid someone saw you?'

'Give me back that film,' said David.

'It's gone!' said Sebastian, 'but what's troubling you—you're safe!'

'I don't like being tricked.'

'Tricked?'

'I thought I was helping Strefford's wife.'

Sebastian laughed, roared with laughter until his eyes were little bright beads surrounded by flesh. 'He thought he was helping Strefford's wife! Heee-he-he he! Oh, that's rich. You don't expect me to believe that?'

'It's the truth.'

'Why, not even Remington would believe that!'

Sebastian no longer laughed. His face was serious and his eyes watchful. He waited.

'I see,' said David, 'so I'm on your side whether I like it or not!'

'None of us has a choice,' said Sebastian, 'we are all slaves to the Cause. But as pawns we are more powerful than queens on the enemy side. And why? Because we stick together!'

'Stuck is the word!' said David, 'but this time you've come unstuck!'

'Now I am the one in the dark,' said Sebastian.

'You can count me out. I like to know what I'm doing. I like some say in what happens to me.'

'Comrade David. You are on our side. You can't very well be on the other—now.'

'They might believe me.'

'I won't laugh at that—but it is very funny. Listen, comrade . . .'

'Don't call me comrade.'

'Listen, comrade,' said Sebastian. 'Put yourself in Remington's position. Suppose he discovered papers that proved your escape was engineered by us. Suppose he found you had carried the film to us. Suppose he found your wife was not only a member of the Party, but that she had filmed the blue prints?'

'What!'

'You didn't know?'

'I don't believe you!'

'Her membership card is in the safe. Do you want me to fetch it?'

David walked slowly up and down. 'No,' he said.

'What would Remington think? Would he welcome you with open arms?'

David watched the pieces slip into position, felt the jaws grip around his ankle, but for the moment the teeth were padded with velvet.

Sebastian poured another drink, sipped, then said:

'You have no need to worry—now we can rely upon

you.' David wanted to think things out. In that room he couldn't put two thoughts together. He walked towards the door.

'From time to time,' said Sebastian, 'we shall ask you for a favour.' David stood by the door.

'From time to time we shall ask you for a favour' echoed along the corridors of his mind. He could feel the ground slipping away beneath his feet. The moral choices he had been worrying about seemed academic now he was faced with reality. Yet he still felt that somewhere there was the right answer, the solution to all his problems. Problems! Cathy a Party member! Pale hope gleamed through the dark clouds like rain-washed sunshine. Perhaps that explained her behaviour, perhaps they had a hold on her too. Then the dark clouds closed in. Secrets? He thought of Cathy's relationship with Nick. He heard Sebastian talking.

'What did you say?' asked David.

'You might tell your wife that the plans have been delivered safely,' said Sebastian.

David walked through the door into the street. A car horn blared out in three tones. He jumped back on to the pavement, cold and sweating.

He found a telephone booth at the bus station. He called three numbers and found she was working late.

'I want to see you,' he said.

'I'm busy.'

'I've just been talking to a friend of yours called Sebastian.'

'A friend of mine?'

'It's no use bluffing. We've a lot to talk over.'

Catherine walked round the corner with her long legs fighting against the narrow skirt at each step and pulling it tight around her buttocks. She was too preoccupied

to see the male stares as she walked up to David and said in a voice which mixed defiance with apprehension:

'I don't give a damn what you think.'

'Did you come just to tell me that?' he asked.

'No,' she said.

'Good. We'll go somewhere where we can talk.'

He stuck his fist through her arm and walked her past the empty market-place littered with dead stalls. She walked at his side with chin held high as if the world was at her feet and she didn't care which part she trod on. Only the tension in her arm betrayed the effort her pose demanded.

He chose the only pub in the town with a record player in the parlour, ordered two mild beers, asked for a handful of pennies, rammed them all home, and guaranteed music for the remainder of the evening, if not the following morning.

'Sit down,' he said.

Cathy drank half her beer and looked at her fingernails.

'You're in trouble,' he said.

'Is that new?' she asked.

'About photography.'

She turned her glass of beer round and round.

'Who told you?' she asked.

'Strefford gave me the film to smuggle out of the Works.'

'Who told you?' she asked.

'Sebastian.' The record player stopped, paused, clicked, paused, clicked, and produced a woman's voice which boasted it could emulate an emasculated companion. Cathy turned her hand palm upwards on the table slowly like a tame goldfish dying in a bowl of airless water.

'Then you are a communist,' she said.

'Aren't we both?' he asked and realized only when the words were spoken how rough the edge of his voice

had been. She stared at the crumpled palm of her hand, saw his fist cover it, felt the strong grip tighten but found no comfort. 'We're both up to our necks in trouble,' he said. She looked up into his eyes. 'You'd better tell me why you did it,' he said.

'So that you could escape,' she said.

'I don't see the connexion.'

'They promised to repatriate you.'

'You did that for me?' he asked. She didn't answer.

'Well?' he asked.

'Will you listen to me?' she asked. He drank beer and nodded his head. 'Have you ever told a lie to prevent someone being hurt?' she asked, then: 'and find that you've only hurt them more?'

'Go on,' he said.

'I thought I could make you happy. You were going away. It was little enough.'

'So you said "yes" when I asked you to be my wife?'

'On our last night, I was cold in your arms.'

'Is that all?' he asked.

'All!' she laughed bitterly. 'I could have borne a little thing.'

'Is it so important?'

She shook her head as if she couldn't explain any more if he didn't understand already.

'I became friendly with Nick. We feel the same way about fundamentals. We're both like animals.'

'Then why did you steal the plan?'

'You were badly wounded. They said you would die.'

'I don't want your pity,' he said.

'You would never have escaped without it.'

'No one helped me to escape.'

'But they said . . .'

'They say anything.'

'I don't understand.'

David banged his pot on the table. The beer spilt over the polished surface. 'You gave them the plans *after* I had escaped!' he said. Cathy closed her eyes as if overcome by a great tiredness.

'I wanted to save your life,' she said, her voice a monotone.

'I was in hiding for a month before I crossed the lines.'

'You didn't need my sacrifice . . .'

'Did you tell Nick?' he asked.

'There's nothing more important than the 101 in Nick's life.'

'Weren't you taking a risk?'

'I don't know.'

'Yet you love him.'

'Yes,' she said and beat the table with the heel of her hand, 'I love him.'

David listened to the music and looked at Cathy. He could feel a heavy chain stapled to his heart begin to drag.

'Would it have been different if I had stayed at home?'

'I don't think so.'

'Was it because you thought I was dead?'

'I loved him before I received the telegram.'

'Did you sleep with him before that?'

'No.'

'Is there no hope?' he said. She thought he spoke without feeling, as if he were made of stone. She shook her head. He walked to the bar and bought more beer.

'I imagine,' he said, 'that Nick has animal magnetism.'

'Must we talk about it?' she asked.

'Have I no rights, or must I give up my wife without even asking why?'

She saw hatred stare out from his narrowed eyes, then disappear.

She looked at her untouched glass of beer. For the first time she felt afraid of what David might do.

'I'm no use to you,' she said.

He shook his head: 'Yet you betrayed both Nick and your country to save my life!'

'It was my last act as your wife. It bought my freedom,' she said.

'Do you want a divorce?' he asked, his voice still apparently emotionless.

'Yes,' she said. A steel shutter snapped down between them. He knew it was the end but he couldn't believe it. Words stumbled slowly out.

'In my heart,' he said, 'is a love which brought me round half the world. Perhaps it doesn't speak the right language. . . .' Cathy felt her resolution weaken. She tortured her hands between her breasts.

'Haven't I hurt you enough?' she said. 'I can't weaken.' She shook her head and said: 'It's no use, David. If I try to be kind again, you'll suffer still more.'

'I hear your voice,' he said. 'You want me to believe that we're finished, but I can't realize what it means. You are my wife. You said "yes" of your own free will. I opened the flood-gates of my love, I believed in you. I trusted you. After one night you decided . . .'

'Please,' she said.

'I've known Nick a long time,' he said, 'but for him we might still have been happy.'

'No,' she said, 'don't blame Nick.'

'I don't blame him,' said David, 'it's the way he's built. He can't help attracting women. Neither can he help tiring once he has slept with them.'

'David!' she said. David stood up.

'We shoot mad dogs,' he said, 'before they can do further harm.'

'David,' she said, 'sit down. You'll find someone better than me. I'm like Nick, no good.'

'You're still my wife!' He lifted her hand and looked at the ring on her finger. 'This ring signifies more than

a physical bond.' He spoke with ice-cold reason. She shook her head.

'I'm no good,' she said.

'You've swallowed every shovelful of sex propaganda!'

'It's the way I'm built, David,' she said.

'The Chinese Major knew what he was talking about,' said David, 'he knew.'

'Who?'

'Sen Lutang,' said David. 'I've wasted enough of your valuable time,' he said and stood up.

'David,' she said, 'don't blame Nick.'

'I'm past blaming him,' said David.

'What are you going to do?' she asked. She tried to hold on to his sleeve and followed him out of the pub towards the terminus.

'There's your bus,' he said. She stood facing him, then walked slowly away and sat down round-shouldered.

David watched the bus crawl on silent tyres round the corner, saw Cathy's dark hair close against a steamed window, then he walked towards the little shop with the newspaper cuttings. He banged on the door, but no one answered. He looked up and down the deserted street and banged again. He heard cars drive by on the main road fifty yards away, heard street lamps hiss weakly against the night sky, then he heard footsteps walk over the creaking floor and the door opened.

'Come in,' said Sebastian, 'we were expecting you.' David followed the thick-legged Sebastian into the kitchen.

'You're still interested in the new jet?' asked David. Sebastian nodded. 'You have the plans.' Sebastian smiled.

'Have you thought of destroying the prototype?' Sebastian walked slowly towards David. His eyes shone with unholy anticipation.

'How?' he asked.

'The aircraft might crash—with a valuable man on board,' said David. Sebastian laughed.

'I thought you were serious,' he said, his hands deprecating the suggestion, but his eyes watched David.

'I was never more serious,' said David.

'But how can it be done?' asked Sebastian.

'I want your agreement in principle,' said David.

'That you can have, if you explain why.'

'That's my business.'

'You have lost your wife?'

'I hate everything—do you understand?—everything around me,' said David.

'Then you must submit yourself to discipline,' said Sebastian.

'I can give you hours,' said David.

'I have been a communist twenty years. I have neither wife nor children. I have given up everything. But one day . . .' Sebastian's eyes glowed with the thought.

'I can't wait that long,' said David.

'You are seeking personal revenge—not social justice.'

'I want to save my wife.'

'One person? We cannot put one woman before everything else.'

'Then you can't help me?'

'I'll ask for advice.'

'Can't you act on your own?'

'You think it might help to destroy this new jet, but they might say we know it is vulnerable to our new fighter, so let them manufacture it!'

'You're no help to me,' said David.

'Go home,' said Sebastian. 'Your anger might have evaporated by tomorrow. I can't risk our organization to assuage a jilted lover's pride.'

David stood up. 'You're a fool,' he said. 'Watch the newspapers and see if I'm playing games.' Anger

appeared in Sebastian's eyes but was quickly controlled. He shrugged his shoulders.

'We'll see,' he said.

David strode through the shop to the door.

'Wait!' said Sebastian. David turned and walked slowly back. 'I've changed my mind,' said Sebastian. 'I'll help you.' As David stood quietly, Sebastian said: 'Providing you obey my instructions, my organization in the factory will help kill your brother in a jet-bomber crash.'

'Good,' said David, then felt a twinge as someone else voiced the hatred in his mind.

'You must wish Nick and Cathy happiness,' said Sebastian.

David narrowed his eyes and asked:

'Is that essential?'

'We are not playing a game,' said Sebastian. 'Only by pretence will you avoid arousing suspicion after the disaster.'

David nodded his head. 'Go on,' he said.

'Have you decided how to cause the fatal crash?' asked Sebastian.

'I have,' said David.

'There's a world of difference between the idea of murder and the reality,' said Sebastian, his eyes starting a lunatic tour of the wall-paper. 'It has to be organized,' he continued. He walked towards the door and said: 'In this life we must synthesize our own interests with those of the Party. That is the criterion of the good state—where the individual good and the common good coincide. You love your wife, you hate this system. Kill the wife-stealer and a bulwark of the capitalist system—two birds with one stone!' David's heart-break blinded his conscience.

The following morning, while David was still turning

the idea of murder into reality, Remington caught up with him in the glass corridor between the drawing offices.

'Can you spare a minute?' he asked, and led the way to his office past shirt-sleeved draughtsmen bent over drawing boards. He offered David a chair, sat down himself, crossed his bony knees and smiled lopsidedly.

'You know,' he said, 'there were two schools of thought about how we should treat you on your return.'

David nodded, tried to be casual and said: 'Yours and someone else's?' Remington smiled and lit a cigarette.

'My superiors said leave it to your family to bring you to your senses.'

'Your superiors weren't very clever,' said David.

'Some families succeeded. Some failed in their duty.'

'You said there was an alternative treatment,' said David.

'Yes,' said Remington, 'a brainwash.' David crossed one knee over the other.

'What do you use as soap and water?'

'Clean ideas.'

'Has the family treatment failed?' asked David.

Remington leant forward.

'Of course it has,' he said. 'It was like sending dead-beat troops against a crack armoured division.'

'Have you ever washed anyone's brain before?' asked David.

'My own,' said Remington. David raised an eyebrow and laughed softly.

'Aren't we being vague?' he asked, 'shouldn't there be charges and evidence and courts of law?'

'People only resort to the law courts when they hate each other,' said Remington.

'Quite!' said David.

'In place of hate, let us put love,' said Remington.

'Is that the best you can do?'

'You know very well what I mean,' said Remington.

'First the family, now words,' said David.

'Just one word,' said Remington, 'just one—love.'

David laughed bitterly. 'A woman's love?' he asked.

'You prefer the reality of class war, of massacre . . . ?' asked Remington, 'of concentration camps?'

'They exist,' said David.

'So does love.'

'You believe in that?' asked David.

'I do,' said Remington. David jumped to his feet.

'You don't catch me so easily,' he said. 'The only love you know is for your bank balance.' He stamped to the door.

'Think it over,' said Remington calmly.

'It's too late for words to alter anything,' said David.

'It would appear,' said Remington, 'that I'm not very good at this . . . brainwashing!' David turned slowly.

'Look around you,' he said. 'Be honest. Is everything perfect in this country? Are people unselfish? Are they good? Are they even truthful?'

'Most of them,' said Remington.

'I thought you were smug. I was right. But you're a bloody hypocrite as well.'

'And you intend to change all this?' asked Remington.

David stared at Remington.

'I've said enough already,' he said and walked out.

A moment after he had gone Remington's telephone rang. He listened to Nick's voice then said: 'I'm on my way over.' He walked along the corridor to Nick's office. Nick and Will sat behind the desk. Blue prints were spread over every flat surface and the safe door was open.

'Trouble?' asked Remington.

'The master plans have gone,' Will said, 'these are the B.100 not the B.101.'

'I know,' said Remington, 'I switched them.' Will closed his eyes slowly, then sat down and smiled.

'I don't want another ten minutes like that,' he said.

'Have you told anyone else?' Remington asked.

'No,' said Nick.

'Have you told Cathy?' asked Remington.

'No, but surely . . . ' said Will.

'Don't tell anyone they were switched. Put them back. The 101 plans are in my office.'

'Why can't we tell Cathy?' asked Nick.

'Just a precaution.'

'But you must have a reason,' said Will.

'I'm not being mysterious, you know, cloak and dagger,' said Remington, 'I insist you tell no-one.'

'If there's any danger threatening the 101, I want to know,' said Nick.

'I'm glad it's the aeroplane you're worried about,' said Remington, 'and not Cathy.'

'I think you had better explain that remark,' said Will. Remington carried his furrowed brow to the window. He looked down at the 101 on the tarmac and saw David talking to a mechanic.

'What are you hinting at?' asked Will.

'I can't give you nice clean facts,' said Remington, 'I wish I could. I don't enjoy being up to my elbows in the slime of treachery.'

'There's no need to wallow in it,' said Will.

'Do you want your precious 101 to fly into the ground? Do you want to lose your brain child?' asked Remington.

'What has that to do with Cathy?' asked Will.

'I'm a connoisseur of treachery,' said Remington. 'I sniff it, I feel it, I taste it. I'm as sensitive as a geiger counter. And I point my finger at Cathy.'

'My God!' said Will, 'this takes me back to the Dark Ages.'

'How little you know about the nature of treason!'

'My staff are innocent until they're proved guilty,' said Will.

'Do I detect doubt in your mind?' asked Remington.

'Listen, Remington. A good security man would give me facts. Only a bad one would risk destroying trust to cover up his own inefficiency,' said Will.

'Cathy opened this safe while Nick was away.'

'She had my permission,' said Nick.

'She has been seen with Strefford, a known communist.'

'Has she now?' asked Nick.

'And with a man called Sebastian who might be high up in communist circles.'

'I've played darts with both of them,' said Nick.

'My God!' said Remington, in real distress, 'can't you see? It's as plain as a pikestaff! Listen, Nick, when a doctor examines a patient he sees more than the layman.'

'A doctor is trained over years, and is disciplined and governed by law,' said Will.

'I've been trained over years and I'm still learning.'

'Unless you can give me evidence acceptable in a court of law, I want to hear no more,' said Will.

'And if I bring proof?'

'You won't against Cathy,' said Nick.

'Suppose I did—would you dismiss her?' asked Remington. Will frowned. He said:

'She would face trial.'

'Even if that meant warning the enemy?' asked Remington.

'Justice is far more important than your hypothetical spy ring,' said Will.

Remington walked out through the door without looking back. He stamped down the stairs and watched the mechanic working on the 101. He marched across.

'What did Mr. David talk to you about?' he asked.

The mechanic looked Remington up and down with a bloodshot eye.

'Better ask him,' he said.

'What are you working on?'

'The flaps.'

'Trouble?'

'There will be if they don't work properly.'

'Is that what you told Mr. David?'

The mechanic looked amazed.

'No,' he said.

'You're a poor liar,' said Remington, staring into the mechanic's eyes. 'I know you're lying,' he said. 'You know I know, but I can't prove it. That makes me a witch-doctor!'

Remington waited patiently in the deserted Staff Canteen. He watched Cathy serve herself with a cold meat salad then joined her at her table.

'How much do you value living in this country?' he asked.

'You're being funny?' she said.

'I'm serious,' he said.

'I've enough on my mind already,' she replied.

'It's time you decided,' he said.

'I gather you're leading up to something,' she said.

'The 101 has been compromised,' he said. Cathy looked stolidly at the blank wall opposite.

'They may go further now they have the plans. They may destroy the prototype. I need your help. That's why I asked if you were still . . . patriotic.'

'Of course I'm patriotic!'

'Then why did you photograph the blue prints?'

'What blue prints?' she said, seeking blindly for a way out.

'You said that too quickly,' said Remington.

'I don't know what you're talking about.'

'Seen Sebastian lately?' asked Remington.

'Sebastian?' she asked.

'Or Strefford?' he asked. Cathy knocked her tray

clattering away from the table leg. She bent down and hid her face while her hand propped the tray up again.

'Awkward, aren't they?' she said.

'I was talking about espionage,' said Remington.

Her eyes could not face his. She glanced round the tables to see if anyone was watching.

'You're as guilty as hell,' said Remington, 'you know it, I know it, but Will wants proof!'

Five minutes after Remington had walked away, she left her food and walked into Nick's office.

'You look ill,' he said and glanced at the plans in his hand.

'Nick, darling,' she said, 'can we go away again?'

'You sound all in,' he said.

'I can't go on,' she said, her voice dangerously calm. 'Can't you see what it's doing to me?' she asked. 'You and David both here—pretending nothing had happened.'

'He's every right to be here.'

'That's why I want to leave.'

'I can't go before the final tests,' said Nick.

She saw half his mind was occupied with the plans. She knocked them out of his hands with a wild sweep.

'I can't stand it any longer,' she cried. He picked up the paper plans, stood and faced her. She ran crooked fingers through her hair. 'Please,' she said, 'please take me away.'

'Cathy,' he smiled and tried to smooth her down.

She clung to him and let her body plead.

'You said this was important,' she said, 'that we were made for each other.' He pulled her hands away from his shoulders.

'Look, Cathy, not here.'

She turned abruptly away.

'It's over a week since we had an evening together,' she said.

'Look, Cathy,' he said, 'the 101's taking all my time. Anyone would think there was another woman.'

Cathy stared, unbelieving at first, then she laughed harshly.

'You don't need a woman,' she said, 'only a bedmate once a fortnight to relieve the pressure.' Nick looked down on Cathy and smiled with neither humour nor warmth.

'Fortunately,' he said, 'this is still a man's world. Until we clear the 101, I'm married to my job.' Cathy burst out laughing. Her eyes were large and bright.

'Physical love is important!' she mimicked, 'we neglect it at our peril! You had me fooled! All you want from a woman is satisfaction.'

'And what else do you think you can give me?' asked Nick. 'Can you discuss compression fatigue equations?'

'There's more in life than aeroplanes.'

'Not in my life.'

'You said you loved me.'

'That doesn't mean I dedicate my life to you.'

'Is it so wrong to want to share it?'

'Share? Like hell! You want to dominate like Bella, like all women. Now get the hell out of here. I'm testing the 101 this evening. If it's a success I'll take you to dinner tomorrow night! Or maybe I'll go to bed early.'

She picked up a shiny-faced clock, but he grasped her hand and in the struggle the clock bounced twice on the floor and stopped ticking.

Nick kissed her against her will and she tried to scratch his face. He let her go.

'You think you're irresistible,' she said, her face white with hatred and her eyes like black diamonds.

'Only to nine women out of ten,' said Nick and wiped his cheek.

'Just what sort of relationship did you visualize between us?' she asked.

'Not marriage,' he said. The telephone rang. Nick listened, then, as he replaced the receiver, he said: 'We'll have to stop talking. Will's waiting for me.' She jabbed the heels of her fists into his face and brought blood to his lips. He smiled and sauntered out.

She collected her senses and walked across the hangar, past the silver-winged 101. Her steps echoed between the metal walls and under the girders of the high roof. She stopped suddenly and listened to her rage beating hammer blows at her temples. She watched a workman, head hidden in the shadows, probing inside the silver wing. The thumping in her head subsided. The man was working in semi-darkness. The shape seemed familiar. She stepped slowly and silently closer to the ladder. As the man climbed down she knew that it was David. They stared at each other in the silence, aware that if anyone saw them the situation would grow explosively dangerous.

'Well?' he asked.

'What were you doing?' she asked, unable to stop the words.

'A last-minute adjustment,' he said. She noticed his eyes were straying from her face to the monkey-wrench clenched in his right fist. She looked up and saw in his eyes a strange gleam as if a devil had taken possession of his soul.

'David,' she cried. She beat him on the chest. 'David,' she pleaded. 'Don't be a fool,' and tears shone in her eyes.

'You're afraid,' he said and pushed her back against the ladder. As he spoke an iron door clanged in the far corner of the hangar. 'Now keep your mouth closed,' he said, 'we're in this business together . . . you led the way.'

'David,' she whispered, 'what were you doing?'
They heard footsteps at the far end of the hangar.
'Nothing,' he said. 'You've not seen me.'

He pushed her towards the exit.

'Go on,' he said. He watched her feet drag slowly over the oil-blackened concrete. Then he hid himself in the shadows. She trailed past jigs like the bones of museum monsters and covered fifty nerve-straining yards.

'Hello,' said Remington. He stood alongside the front wheel of a petrol bowser. Cathy made as if to pass by. 'In a hurry?' asked Remington and straddled the path to the door.

'I am,' she said.

'What were you doing with the 101?' asked Remington.

She smiled weakly, as if nothing mattered.

'That's a stupid question,' she said. Remington nodded his head. He laughed harshly at the invisible ropes tying his hands.

'If I were anywhere else in the world,' he said, 'I'd have a couple of thugs who would beat an answer out of you, no matter how stupid the question.' He paused, then repeated, 'Anywhere else in the world!'

'And would that guarantee the truth!' she asked.

'I must have proof!' said Remington. 'Every bell rings the alarm!'

'Do you mind if I move on?' asked Cathy, trying to look bored.

'I'll pin it on you if it takes me ten years,' said Remington.

'I don't want to miss my bus,' said Cathy and edged past him as if he were wet paint. Remington watched her pass outside into the evening then he thumped the bowser mudguard.

'I give up,' he said, then he paused. 'No,' he said, 'no, I feel like giving up but I can't. It's like a dream. I'm

running away⁴ from terror but my boots are made of lead. My hands claw the air, but I make no progress.' He kicked the tyre then walked close by the 101 to Nick's office, but failed to see David.

He caught Nick in shirt sleeves climbing into a pressurized suit. As he spoke he heard the hangar doors grind open and saw the ambulance and the fire tender roll into position by the control tower.

'Nick,' he said, 'I want a thorough examination of the 101 made before anyone flies her.'

Nick smiled. 'Too late,' he said, and pointed to a black saloon car by the control tower. 'Ministry of Supply,' he added. Will hopped in on his crutches.

'Met. report is perfect,' he said, then he saw Remington.

'What's this?' Will asked.

'You can't fly the 101 tonight,' said Remington.

'What's wrong now?' asked Nick.

'I suspect sabotage.'

'Who the hell is it this time?' asked Nick.

Remington listened to the silence which followed Nick's question and felt the vacuum drawing the thoughts out of his head.

'It's still Catherine,' he said. Will stared at Remington's face as if it had undergone some fantastic metamorphosis.

'You're out of your mind,' he said, and banged his crutch against the office table. 'Get out,' he shouted and slow moral anger long held in check flushed from his collar to his forehead.

'How long before you take off?' asked Remington, icily cold in face of Will's attack.

'I refuel, run through the check lists, talk to the Ministry men—say an hour or two,' said Nick, trying to play down the situation.

'Give me two hours to beat the truth out of someone?' asked Remington.

'Are you trying to destroy Nick's confidence in the

101?' asked Will. Remington closed his eyes and breathed in slowly and deeply.

'Make a very good check on everything before you take off!' he said, then walked out of the office.

'Catherine a saboteur!' laughed Nick.

'If we accepted everything that Remington said,' said Will, 'no one would be outside prison!'

'He must have a terrible mind,' said Nick, 'a single-tracker, like mine, but a different line, mind you.'

'He backs the evil in people to win,' said Will.

'And we don't,' said Nick.

'No!' said Will, 'we don't, we can't, not in those we love.'

'Not quite so often anyway!' laughed Nick and zipped up his white overall.

David watched Remington wrapped blindly in his thoughts walk past the 101 towards Nick's office. He heard Remington close the iron door. Then David too walked thought-ridden out of the hangar.

Nick had stolen Cathy. Nick was a reactionary. Yet a huge shadow of doubt loomed in the background of David's mind and horror at taking God-given life rumbled like distant thunder threatening to destroy the pillars of his logic.

He walked out of the hangar across the hot tarmac into the control tower. He looked over the fresh green airfield to the distant line of the river and the darker green and deeper shadows of the wooded slope on the far bank. He saw the purples and yellows of scattered wild flowers, heard bird songs kissed by the sunlight and looked at the blue of the clear sky, beautiful beyond the expression of equations.

He looked at his hands and slowly clenched them. He'd made the decision. He'd taken the action. It was too late to change his mind. He saw the white-overalled mechanics turning the three-foot winders which opened

the hangar doors. Out of the dark interior, at first sight like a white ghost, rolled the silver 101. He watched the mechanics checking and adjusting. They'd never notice the switch.

Remington ran across the tarmac to his car and drove like a madman down the tree-lined road towards the town. Break the weakest link in the chain, he thought. He sped down the steep hill towards the flat, lush, low-lying, green fields of the river valley and struck the black tarmac of the by-pass with tyres squealing protest. Everything depended on him, the fate of the nation. . . . He'd beat the truth out of Cathy no matter what his old father had said about raising his hand to a woman. He had to go beyond the law. He shrugged off a momentary twinge of conscience by labelling it as weakness. A moment later he saw the big lorry and trailer half-way out of the side turning, moving slowly and blocking half the road. He saw the double-decker bus approaching in the opposite direction and filling the offside lane. There was no room to squeeze through. He pressed his foot on the brake, and swerved the car with a spine-jolting bump over the kerb and closed his eyes tightly as the telegraph post shattered the front windscreen. Remington hit the door head-first and flew seven yards before crumpling senseless on the fresh green grass. His right leg was bent forward from below the knee at a sickening angle.

The bus driver climbed white-faced from his cabin and ran awkwardly to Remington. He knelt down, touched the senseless forehead, then turned to his mate the conductor.

'He's still alive, get an ambulance.'

'Look at the bonnet,' said somebody's Mum.

'He was doing fifty miles an hour, at least,' said the bus driver.

'There ought to be a law against it!' said somebody's Mum, thinking of her young children.

'He'll have a good reason,' said the bus driver, 'they all have!'

'Ain't never heard of the speed limit,' said the conductor, 'some of these bodies.'

David stared through the control tower window and watched Nick, bulky in his flying kit, climb out of the car, followed by Will. They walked slowly to the building. David forced himself to face the door as their voices floated up the stairs. When the door opened he turned involuntarily away.

'Hello, David,' said Will, his voice happy with pleasant surprise, 'come to join us in the big moment?' David nodded. Nick pointed through the window across the airfield to a flock of shining black crows waddling flat-footed in small circles. 'Where's the Very pistol?' he said, saw it as he spoke, and fired a red cartridge towards the birds. The bright ball of fire curved gracefully through the evening sky at the head of a streamer of smoke, bounced as it hit the ground, but failed to scare away the crows.

'Send the jeep out to scare them off,' he said, then moved over to David, wondering how to express the thoughts in his mind.

'See any partridges?' he asked. David saw a covey running round each other playfully. He handed the binoculars to Nick. 'Do you remember how we poached together on this land when we were kids?' continued Nick. David turned away.

'That was a long time ago,' he said.

'Seems like yesterday,' said Will.

'I've been through a war since then,' said David harshly.

'And I've waited long lonely days while both you boys were missing, believed killed,' said Will. The

unusual sharpness in Will's voice caused David involuntarily to search his mind to see what he'd done wrong. He laughed quietly as soon as he realized how he'd slipped back into the father-son relationship. He watched the jeep bounce across the turf.

'You've prospered,' said David, 'you can't grumble.'

'There're bound to be ups and downs in a man's life,' said Nick, 'and you've got to take both.'

'Have you come here to talk or to test the 101?' said David suddenly.

'What's wrong with you, David?' asked Will. 'You're acting as if you hated both of us.'

'Perhaps I do!' said David. Nick looked David in the eye and said:

'You have every reason to hate me, but Will's never done you or anyone harm.' Nick paused for a moment, hoping that some look of forgiveness or understanding would shine from David's eyes. Then he said: 'I'd give anything to turn the clock back.' He picked up his notes and walked out of the control room. Will walked to a locker and pulled out a helmet, then hopped towards the door.

'What are you doing with that?' asked David.

'I'm flying with Nick,' Will said and walked out. David's face looked white and the skin stretched tightly over the cheek-bones. He watched first Nick then Will climb into the 101.

Joe, the radio-telephonist, ambled in, down at heel, greasy-handed, long-haired, large brown-eyed, an exploited genius who gave half his money to the cigarette manufacturer who in turn gave the lion's share to the state, who paid Joe, who chain-smoked.

'First time I've seen the old man fly since he lost his leg.' David didn't hear. Joe shrugged a double-jointed padded shoulder and sat down.

David heard a band playing in the distance. Strains

of music drifted on a frail uncertain wind. The music reminded him of a church fete or the Salvation Army. He remembered Nick and himself in Boy Scouts' uniform, standing proudly to attention. He'd come a long way since then and for the first time wondered if he'd travelled the right road. A man had to take the rough with the smooth. No one could have everything he wanted, no matter what the system, or what his job. That's what Nick had said.

'I thought you'd be flying with them,' said Joe.

'Shut up!' snarled David.

'Lost your nerve?' asked Joe nonchalantly, his cigarette flipping with his lip as he spoke.

'Who's lost his nerve?' asked Strefford from the doorway.

'What the hell are you doing here?' asked Joe.

'Mr. David invited me,' said Strefford, his eyes small. Joe shrugged his shoulders.

The 101 halted at the end of the runway. Nick looked at Will.

'This is your last chance to step out,' he said. Will shook his head slowly from side to side. 'I want David to know I trust him, in deed, as well as in word.' Nick laughed.

'It's your funeral!' he said, and checked the trimmers neutral, airbrakes in, fuel gauges and pump switches, flaps up, instruments, oxygen, hatches and canopy, bomb doors closed. He looked round the sky away from the airfield, turned slowly into the runway, aligned the aircraft precisely and applied the brakes. He spoke to Joe in the control tower, then opened the throttles until the 101 strained like a greyhound against the leash. Then the trap door lifted and the 101 surged forward low over the tarmac driven by engines seething with a suppressed power that threatened to destroy its controllers.

Nick glanced sideways, past Will gripping the arm, rests, at the edge of the black tarmac runway speeding increasingly fast past the windows and smoothly under the wings. Nick kept the nose down until the last moment, flicked the undercarriage up then climbed effortlessly in a smooth, silent upward sweep that pressed Will back into his seat.

'Still confident?' asked Nick without raising his voice.

'Does it matter now?' asked Will. 'Whatever happens David knows I trusted him.'

'Famous last words,' laughed Nick.

They flew on in silence, higher than the highest mountain, over a silent world veiled from their eyes by the moisture in the atmosphere.

'She's a beautiful aeroplane,' said Will.

'Doesn't it make you feel like a god up here?' asked Nick. Will shook his head.

'No,' he said and cleared his throat, 'I feel very small and humble.'

'Don't worry,' said Nick, 'everyone feels a bit frightened half-way between heaven and earth, surrounded by all this silent space, with the earth very bright below and the sky very black above.'

'How much longer do we fly?' asked Will.

'I'll not throw her about today,' Nick said. 'One run over the airfield to let the men see her in action, then down flaps and we land.'

'We've built a winner here,' said Will.

'It looks like it,' said Nick, and in a gentle curving descent pushed the nose down.

David watched the men stream across the tarmac and stand in groups scanning the evening sky for the 101.

'Here it is!' went up the cry.

The 101 streaked across the airfield at nought feet chased shrieking by the noise of its own engines. Then,

almost before it had arrived, it had disappeared, leaving behind a brief memory of beautifully shaped wings speeding through the air as swiftly and gracefully as a giant swallow powered by ten thousand whip-lashed horses.

David saw all this. A minute later he heard Nick's voice over the radio-telephone informing control that he was making one more beat up before landing.

At two hundred and thirty miles an hour, Nick would lower the flaps. At that speed one only would work. The 101 would be thrown over on its back like a hooked fish and plunge out of control into the ground. The bits would be thrown over three fields. No one would ever know how it had happened. He was quite safe.

He saw Nick and Will sitting there, relaxed, unaware one minute, then the next it would all be over. He looked at Strefford and Strefford looked at him.

'I'm here to see you don't change your mind at the last minute,' said Strefford.

Cathy propped open the suitcase on her bed and pushed into it a drawerful of underclothes and an armful of wildly selected frocks. Her cheque book sprouted leaves out of her open handbag and a photograph of Nick smiled up the chimney from the hearth.

She sat on the suitcase and was about to force the locks shut when the door-bell rang. She stood up and the lid flicked open and clothes jumped out of the case on to the bed. She looked round the room at gaping drawers, open wardrobe and chairs strewn with garments, then walked out and closed the door on the faithful projection of her mind. The bell rang again. She recognized the jaunty signature tune and opened the door, saw Butch standing there, smiling broadly, his eyes twinkling and the lines on his face creased deep.

'I hear you're in trouble,' he said and walked in, 'so I thought I'd come and bail you out.'

'Who told you?' she asked.

'I get to know these things,' he drawled.

'You're guessing again.'

'I'm not far wrong, am I?' he asked. She looked up at him, then slumped down in a chair.

'You're right,' she said, 'I'm in trouble.'

'Has the novelty worn off?' he asked, and sat on the edge of the table, swinging his legs.

'The eternal triangle with the 101 'at the apex,' she said.

'Does David fit in anywhere?' asked Butch. She stared at the dead black fireplace and remembered the picture of Nick lying on its back like a corpse staring fixedly up the chimney. She closed her eyes. Butch read the silence and waited.

'I'm frightened of David,' she said.

'But not of Nick?' asked Butch.

'He prefers the 101 so I'm leaving town.'

'Which one is driving you out?'

'David.'

Butch watched his legs swing backwards and forwards.

'When I came home people could see my wounds,' he said. 'People believed what they could see and were kind. David has no visible wounds so no one is kind. If anything they're unkind.'

'We were all friendly at the start.'

'He wanted his wife's loving arms.'

'He's out of the Old Testament,' she said.

'Some husbands forgive their wives,' said Butch.

'I thought he was dead! So did everybody.'

'Perhaps he loves you too much. . . .'

'No,' said Cathy, 'David wants revenge. "Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's wife. . . ."' She stopped talking suddenly, her mouth wide open with sudden understanding. She grasped Butch's arm, and opened her eyes wide with horror. 'He'll kill Nick!

That's what he was doing,' she said. Butch held her gently and calmly by the shoulders.

'That's what David was doing!' she said, blinking.

'I saw him with the 101.' She was talking quickly and her voice was pitched in a low urgent monotone. 'He should never have been there. I thought he was going to strike me. I thought he hated me! But he was afraid I'd seen him sabotage the 101 *so that it would kill Nick!*'

Butch walked across the room to the telephone and dialled the aerodrome.

'Let me speak to Nick,' he said.

'He's not replying in his office,' said the thin voice in his ear.

'Try Air Traffic Control.'

'Air Traffic,' said David's voice.

'Where's Nick?'

'He's in the air,' answered David.

'For God's sake stop him!'

'Who's that?' asked David.

'Butch.'

'I can't stop him,' said David's voice.

'Is Will there?'

'Will's in the 101.'

'Give them a red,' Butch said.

Cathy snatched the receiver from Butch's hand. 'David,' she said, 'he's not worth it. Darling! he's not worth it.' She heard the line go dead. She lowered the receiver. 'Don't do it,' she pleaded as if David could still hear.

Butch didn't wait. He grabbed Cathy by the arm.

'They're both airborne, Nick and Will. We must get to the control tower—we can warn them, if they aren't dead already!' They stared at each other wide-eyed with apprehension. He grabbed her by the hand. 'Come on!' he said.

'If the 101 crashes, I know where David will go,' she said. She watched Butch run out of the room, heard him clatter down the stairs. She sat down and started to pick at the inside of her lip with her front teeth. She stared at the wall-paper, her forehead creased, her eyes opened wide.

'I didn't mean this to happen,' she said. She shook her head and tasted blood in her mouth. She stood up and talked to herself in a calm reasonable voice. 'I caused it,' she said, 'I drove him into it. Perhaps it's not too late.' She walked out of the flat like a sleep-walker, leaving the doors open, collecting neither hat nor coat.

David replaced the receiver on Cathy's pleading voice then looked straight into Strefford's eyes.

'Who was that?' Strefford asked.

'None of your damn business,' said David and turned his back on Strefford.

Joe, the R/T operator, blew a cloud of cigarette smoke into the air and repeated: 'None of your damn business.' Strefford leant over the long desk and picked up the Very pistol. He smelt at the dead cartridge, ejected it and loaded a live round from the cardboard box.

'We don't load until we know what signal we want to send,' said Joe.

'I don't want to send a signal,' said Strefford.

'How long has Nick been airborne?' asked David.

'Forty minutes,' said Joe.

'Seems like a year,' said David.

'Been doing some thinking?' asked Joe.

'Raise Nick on the R/T,' said David suddenly.

'Why?' asked Strefford.

'None of your damn business,' said Joe, pleasantly, and switched on the transmitter. Strefford stood on the flex with one foot and kicked with the other. A blue

spark hissed where the wire frayed by the plug on the wall.

'What the hell d'you do that for?' asked Joe.

'I tripped,' said Strefford, flicking off the safety catch on the Very pistol.

'Can you fix it?' asked David, coming down to earth from the Olympian heights of his decision.

'Ten seconds,' said Joe, taking four matches from his box.

'I wouldn't,' said Strefford, raising the pistol.

Joe glanced at David.

'Is he out of his mind?' he asked, his cigarette drooping down his chin. He looked at Strefford's eyes, then said: 'He broke that lead deliberately.'

David moved closer to Strefford.

'Don't point firearms at people, ever,' he said.

'Stay there,' said Strefford.

'If I make him and the gun,' said David, 'tell Nick not to use his flaps.' Joe spat the cigarette out of his mouth. He nodded. His eyes were as round as an owl's. He glanced past Strefford across the airfield and saw the 101 a speck on the horizon growing rapidly larger, flying inches above the grass on a breath-stopping beat-up, racing ahead of its own sound. Strefford saw Joe looking over his shoulder and knew it was a trick to make him turn round. He smiled, for the windows were at his back.

'He won't have time to reload,' said David.

'He won't need to,' said Joe and ducked. He thought the 101 had misjudged. The noise hit their eardrums like a swipe from a giant. The tower seemed to jump three feet from its foundations. Strefford pulled the trigger and sent a green ball of fire cannoning off the ceiling on to the wall on to the thick windows back past his own ear like a thunderbolt, leaving trails of sparks, singeing the carpet and filling the room with acrid smoke. David hit Strefford across the neck, didn't stay

to watch him fall, but pulled Joe from under the table and said:

'You've ten seconds to mend that wire.' Joe trimmed the ends of the wire and pulled out the useless plug.

David watched the 101, a speck in the sky, turn slowly sideways on.

'He's starting a circuit.'

'O.K., O.K.,' said Joe and stuck the wires into the plug holes. He jumped as the spark flared, remembered to switch off and tried again. A red light on the set glowed.

'It's working,' said David and waited. He heard Nick's voice loud and clear over the radio. He took hold of the microphone.

'Nick,' he said, 'this is David speaking, can you hear me?'

'Hear you, David,' came back Nick's voice.

'Don't use your flaps—they're unserviceable. Only one will lower.' The crackling of interference was the only noise for long taut moments. David and Joe looked at the loudspeaker. Strefford moved on the floor.

'O.K., David. I'll take your word for it . . . and thanks,' said Nick's voice. David handed the microphone to Joe then ran down to the fire tender and the ambulance drivers.

'Stand by at the end of the runway for an overshoot,' he said, and climbed on to the fire tender. He remembered Strefford lying senseless on the floor at Joe's feet in the control tower. Only Nick and Will mattered now. Joe would have to cope by himself.

As the tender raced at breakneck speed across the rough grass of the airfield he thought of Cathy and the innocent starry-eyed love, rich in promise, that he had cherished. . . . His life lay like a blitz-shattered town, an empty shell, a mangled hand that was better amputated. It was too late to start afresh. He closed his

eyes, clenched them and tried to drive the despair out of his head.

The tender halted at the far end of the runway. A fire-fighter dressed in white asbestos and looking like the Michelin man climbed out of the driving seat and set at ready all the switches on the foam generator. David saw, through the helmet window, a face running with sweat, then he turned away and watched the 101 catching the red glow from the setting sun. The line of workers a quarter of a mile away sensed from the presence of the ambulance and fire tender that something had gone wrong. They stood quietly, white faces up to the sky watching the aeroplane circle.

Inside the 101, Nick turned to Will.

'So we land without flaps,' he said.

'You believe David?' asked Will.

'I'd be a fool not to!'

Will jotted figures on his knee pad and spoke at the same time.

'Let me see,' he said quite calmly, 'no flaps means an increase of airspeed, which increases the length of the runway needed by about a quarter. You'll overshoot by about two hundred yards,' he said, apparently pleased with his calculations.

'Like hell I will,' said Nick and spoke into the radio telephone.

'Am circling airfield to use up excess fuel,' he said.

Butch saw the 101 circling the airfield, saw the silent lines of workers in overalls standing hands in pockets along the perimeter. 'They're not dead yet,' he said to himself. He halted opposite the tower and dashed into the control room. He grabbed the microphone and spoke. 'Can you hear me, Nick?' he asked. Joe stood and let Butch sit down in his chair. Joe bowed and said:

'Go right ahead. I only get paid for this job.'

Butch didn't hear Joe.

'Can you hear me, Nick?' he asked again.

'Hear you,' came Nick's voice through the 'loud-speaker.

'Butch here. Someone's tampered with the 101.'

'You're late, Butch. Dave told me that ten minutes ago.'

'David told you!' said Butch. 'Thank God,' he said and turned to Joe.

'Stand by,' said Nick's voice and the loudspeaker magnified a tremble that would not otherwise have been noticed.

'Do you mind?' said Joe and took the microphone with both hands and gave away a friendly look with both eyes.

Nick made his final approach long and low.

'Don't let him crash now,' said Butch, in a low urgent voice.

Joe glanced at Strefford, sitting up now, holding his sick head between bony hands, then turned and stood by Butch and watched the 101 come steadily down, deceptively smooth and calm in a gentle arc that at the last minute threatened to end disastrously in the boundary wall. They lost sight of the aircraft behind the wall. They waited open-mouthed in horror. Then the shining wings seemed to leap over the wall and touch down at high speed. A great gasp of relief like a near miss at a football match rose from the white-faced workers. At first the 101 didn't seem to slow down. It ran smoothly along the runway and had reached the half-way mark apparently still at full speed. Joe turned away.

'I can't bear it,' he said. Butch watched, unable to think beyond the last thousand yards which the 101 was so smoothly devouring.

'Put the bloody brakes on!' shouted Butch.

'He knows what he's doing,' said Joe. At last the 101 started visibly to slow down.

'He's left it too late,' said Butch.

'Stand by for a ground loop,' said Nick's voice over the loudspeaker. The fire tender and the ambulance stood quietly at the end of the runway. The 101 still sped along at thirty miles an hour. The nose crossed the perimeter track. Nick sat calm and motionless.

'Hang on, Will,' he said. He kicked over the rudder, and pulled back on the stick, for what it was worth. A panorama of hedges and buildings and sky swept dizzily past the windscreen. Tyres scraped sideways over the tarmac, the fuselage shuddered and the outer wing tip sank lower. Nick watched it skim the verge. 'If it touches we've had it,' he said. It brushed tall blades of grass and shaved buttercups. A moment later it was all over. The 101 rolled gently across the turf as if nothing had happened. Nick and Will sat quietly in complete relaxation.

'Well,' said Will, 'you did your best to wreck it.'

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

CATHY jumped off the bus, ran three short clattering steps, then walked quickly towards Sebastian's shop. The front door opened at her touch and the bell jangled spasmodically on the end of the rusty spiral spring. She closed the door slowly with her hand behind her back and listened to the dry rattle of the bell dying away.

'David?' she called. No one replied. She moved forward a hesitant pace into the room and said again: 'David.' She heard quick light footsteps on the pavement

outside the window, turned her head and saw only a paper boy hurrying home with an empty newsbag slung over his shoulder.

She looked into the parlour. She realized she was frightened, sniffed the air and saw a wooden chair lying on its side.

'David,' she called. She held her bag pressed below her breasts, her elbows close to her sides, her head slightly cocked, her knuckles white. A wave of fear prickled the nape of her neck. Not a sound disturbed the thin film of dust on the furniture. Yet the wooden chair had been knocked over.

She wanted to walk into the room but her feet refused to budge. Her eyes searched the pattern of the carpet, every dirty inch of the skirting board, then she knelt slowly in the doorway and looked under the table. She saw Sebastian's eyelids drawn back over white-ringed eyeballs. She saw his lips fixed in a grin which uncovered decayed teeth and pink gums. She stood there in frozen terror. The grim face started to dance before her eyes. The kitchen door opened slowly at her left hand. She closed her eyes tight and screamed and heard the scream thrown back from the ceiling, from the windows, while her lungs pumped more air through her windpipe.

Strefford pulled her hands from her face and slapped her cheek. She opened her eyes and took another deep breath and her eyes screwed up ready for more screaming. Strefford looked anxiously over his shoulder, pulled her into the room away from the doorway. She cowered away from the table.

Strefford glanced at the dead Sebastian, glanced at the revolver held in the right hand, then turned to Cathy.

'You did it?' she said.

'What are you doing here?' he asked, 'alone . . .'

'I'm looking for David,' she said. Strefford nodded

absently. His eyes looked around the room then came back to Cathy.

'Yes,' he said, 'the 101 crashed. The police are after both of us. That's why we killed Sebastian.'

'But why. . . ?'

'Because Sebastian tipped off the police about all of us.' Strefford eyed Cathy. 'They're looking for you as well,' he said. 'They know you stole the plans.' As he spoke the front door rattled. Strefford looked through the curtained peephole and saw a tall helmet ploughing through the sea of curious heads.

'The police,' he said, 'come on,' and grabbed her by the arm, 'we don't want to hang for murder.'

'Where are you taking me?' she asked.

'To meet David,' he said. He pulled her through a dark scullery, opened a door and led her down fifty yards of narrow high-walled alleyway which ended between two shops on the High Street. She followed him white-faced and large-eyed on to a bus.

'Two to the station,' said Strefford. The conductor looked at Cathy's pale strained face, but said nothing. Strefford glanced over his shoulder but nobody followed. One thought dominated his mind.

'If they catch us. . . .' he began. . .

'What happened to Nick?' she asked. Strefford paused before answering.

'He was killed,' he replied.

'They'll hang David,' she said.

'We get off here,' he said and led her down the slope past the parked taxi-cabs to the station booking-hall. He slid a pound note through the hatch.

'Two first-class to Liverpool,' he asked and waited with fingers scratching the counter. He snatched the tickets and change then turned to Cathy, who walked too slowly so he half dragged her by the arm.

'Do you want to get us caught?' he snarled.

'They'll hang David,' she said and stared at the large flagstones paving the platform and remembered a day a life-time ago when she had said good-bye to David at the same station. The ticket collector looked at Cathy and frowned. 'Liverpool train, platform 10,' he said and watched Cathy walk away with the man in spectacles. He scratched the hair above his left ear and thought he'd seen her before somewhere.

Strefford climbed into the carriage, sat opposite Cathy and stared with slightly bloodshot eyes through thick lenses.

'David will probably be at the rendezvous already,' he said.

'It's a nightmare,' she said and shook her head. On the platform the guard walked past, looked into the compartment, then blew his whistle. The train slid away smoothly and quietly, slowly gained momentum out of the station, passed the coal-crammed sidings then sped under bridges, over rivers, across flat fields, drumming a rhythm from the shining iron rails.

Cathy saw Strefford watching her reflection in the window. She pulled her jacket closer and shivered.

'When did you both escape?' she asked.

'As soon as the 101 crashed,' he said.

'Are you certain Nick was killed?'

Strefford looked away from the reflection and stared at Cathy. 'Nothing could have lived after that crash,' he said and watched her narrowly.

'When we reach Liverpool,' he said, 'there's a Polish ship in harbour.' The train ran screaming into a tunnel.

'Suppose I hadn't been at the shop,' said Cathy. 'Would you have left me behind?'

'You're growing too clever,' said Strefford. He leant slowly forward and pushed out his jaw so that his bottom lip grew and overlapped the upper. He struck her with the back of his hand and knocked her head

against the padded wall. 'I said you're growing too clever,' he said.

Nick taxied the aircraft to the control tower, helped Will down the ladder and waited for David on the fire tender.

'We've a lot of talking to do,' said Will. 'Remington mustn't hear of this.' Butch ran out of the control tower.

'Strefford's disappeared,' he said.

'We can't talk here,' said Nick and pushed his way through and joked with the crowd of workers, heading towards his car.

'Trouble with the flaps,' he kept repeating all the way up to the car door in answer to their questions.

'A full report will be on the notice-boards in the morning,' called out Will. They slammed doors then drove across to the administrative block.

Will gripped David by the arm and smiled out some of the warmth from his heart. 'Thank God,' he said.

'I hate to introduce a discordant note,' drawled Butch, 'but friend Strefford has disappeared and Cathy has chased off after David. She imagined that he'd be on the run.'

'On the run?' asked David.

'When it seemed that the 101 had been sabotaged for . . . good and proper, she thought you'd disappear,' said Butch.

'Where would you have gone?' asked Nick.

'To Strefford's shop,' said David.

'Let's go,' said Butch.

'Just a minute,' said Will, 'you don't need my help—and there's the flap business to straighten out here.'

'Remington?' asked Nick.

'Combined with the blue print trouble . . .' Will added.

'What was that?' asked David.

'Remington knows Cathy tried to photograph the 101 plans,' said Will.

'She did,' said David, 'to buy my escape.'

'Not the 101,' said Nick. 'She might have tried to, but for once Remington earned his money—he switched the plans.'

'Go and find Cathy,' said Will to David. 'She must love you to make a sacrifice like that!' then he climbed out of the car.

Ten minutes later the car turned into the side-street opposite the bus station and faced an ambulance and a shiny black police van.

'My God!' said David, and opened the door and ran. Nick and Butch followed at his heels.

'What's happened?' David asked a policeman.

'Somebody shot himself,' said the constable and looked at Nick, still wearing his flying suit. He asked Nick:

'Do you know someone here?'

'Is this where Strefford lives?' asked Nick. David nodded.

'Who's Strefford?' asked the policeman.

'One of our workmen at the factory,' said Nick.

'Perhaps you'd like to speak to the Inspector,' said the constable and led the way inside.

The darkening fields slid past the carriage window as the train sped on over smooth lines.

'How was David travelling?' Cathy asked.

'Car,' said Strefford.

'Whose?'

'His brother's.'

'I don't think . . .'

'I'll do the thinking,' said Strefford.

'You look out at a strange distorted world through those spectacles,' she said.

'I'm one of the creator's mistakes,' said Strefford, and laughed harshly.

'No . . . ' she said.

'Why do you shrink away from me?' She shook her head. 'I don't want your pity,' he said.

'Isn't there anyone you love, your mother, a girl?'

Strefford laughed.

'Don't tell me fairy stories,' he said. 'The beast never becomes a Prince Charming and the Beauty never loves him! Perhaps you'll find out what really happens.'

The train puffed into the glass-roofed cavern of Exchange Station and halted amongst the dull echoes of escaping steam, of carriage doors slamming, of iron trolley wheels rolling over flagstoned platforms.

Strefford gripped Cathy by the arm and led her down the platform.

He saw the four policemen at the barrier. They surveyed the crowd with an unconcern that almost calmed Strefford's fears, but he knew when their eyes flickered to and from his face that the net was tightening. He wondered what to do: escape so that he could continue his work for the cause elsewhere; or give himself up and wait for the victory which he knew was made inevitable by the enemy's own immorality.

The two policemen in uniform vaulted the fence and with long dignified strides walked down the platform. Passengers turned and watched, fascinated. The plain-clothed men separated company and ran quickly along the platform on either side.

Cathy, without reason and as if controlled by some outside force, tried to jerk free her arm and escape. Strefford thrust his hand into his pocket and drew from the dirty raincoat flapping around his legs a revolver.

Catherine stopped struggling.

'Stay where you are!' called Strefford.

'Put your gun away,' said the sergeant as if he were talking to a little boy.

'Think of your children at home!' said Strefford. 'How much do they pay you to stop a bullet?'

'Put your gun down and come along with us. We'll look after you,' coaxed the sergeant.

'You fool,' said Strefford. 'You don't know what you are doing. I'm fighting your battle. . . .'

'Put your gun away, son. . . .'

'I'll kill the girl,' said Strefford and backed towards an open carriage door, his eyes wide with rage at his helplessness either to escape or to convince these stupid police. He tightened his arm round Cathy's neck and dug his revolver into her back until she squirmed with pain and finally cried out in agony. The sergeant stopped involuntarily, watching the plain-clothed man climb carefully into the carriage from the far side. The engine gave a mighty jerk which sent carriages banging buffer to buffer down the line. Catherine staggered away from the struggle into the police sergeant's arms.

'Mrs. Duerden?' he asked. She didn't struggle, but nodded her head.

'I give myself up,' she whispered. He smiled.

'It's not you we want,' he said, but nodded across to Strefford, 'but that gentleman.' Cathy shook her head. 'Your husband is on his way by car. He'll pick you up at headquarters.'

'Oh David,' she said, and blinked.

'Wait and see!' cried Strefford and tried to shake a fist at the crowd by the barrier.

'Wait and see!' he cried as the police escorted him away.

